

Restaurant to Another World



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NOVEL

VISIT...

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A character with blonde hair and a red hat is shown from the back, looking towards a large, stylized illustration of a cat's face on a wall. The cat has large, expressive eyes and whiskers. The scene is set in a room with wooden paneling and a window showing a sunset or sunrise.

Aletta stood before the door...but something was weird about it. She tilted her head, bewildered.

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Katsumi Enami

*Restaurant to
Another World* **5**

“I’ve brought
water.”

The elf girl—Aletta’s
co-worker, *Kuro*—
repeated, her doll-like
expression empty.



**“Aye,
let’s eat!”**

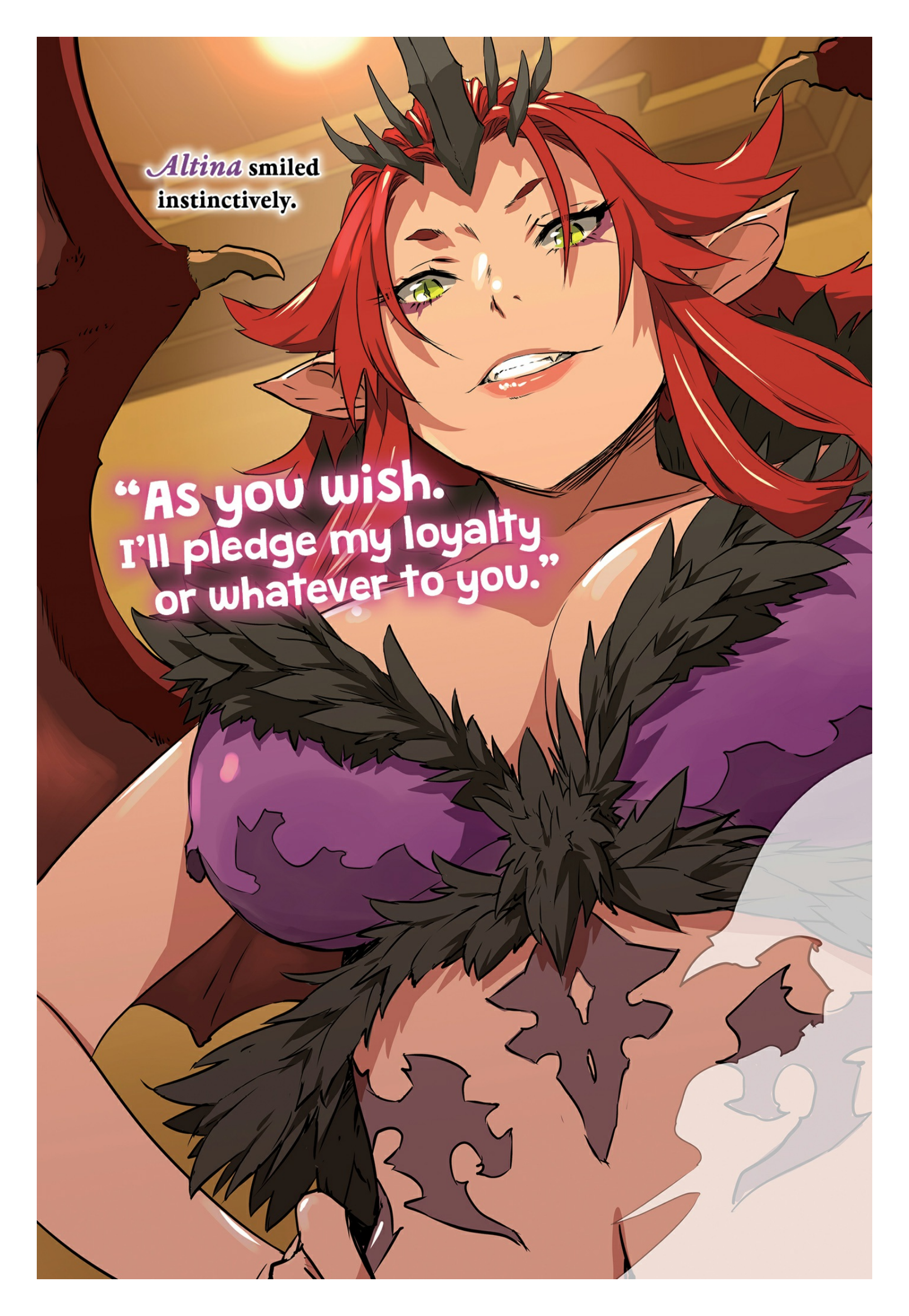
The oden didn’t take long
to warm up, spreading
its appetizing aroma
throughout the hut.



**“Hoh! This mille
crepe cake’s quite
a pretty dessert.”**

**As the master placed cake on the
plates, the faeries offered each other
their impressions and predictions.**





Altina smiled
instinctively.

“As you wish.
I’ll pledge my loyalty
or whatever to you.”

“Gentlemen,
today’s feast is on me!”

Tatsugorou announced to the table as
the scent of the teriyaki burger’s sauce
found its way to their noses.





Introduction

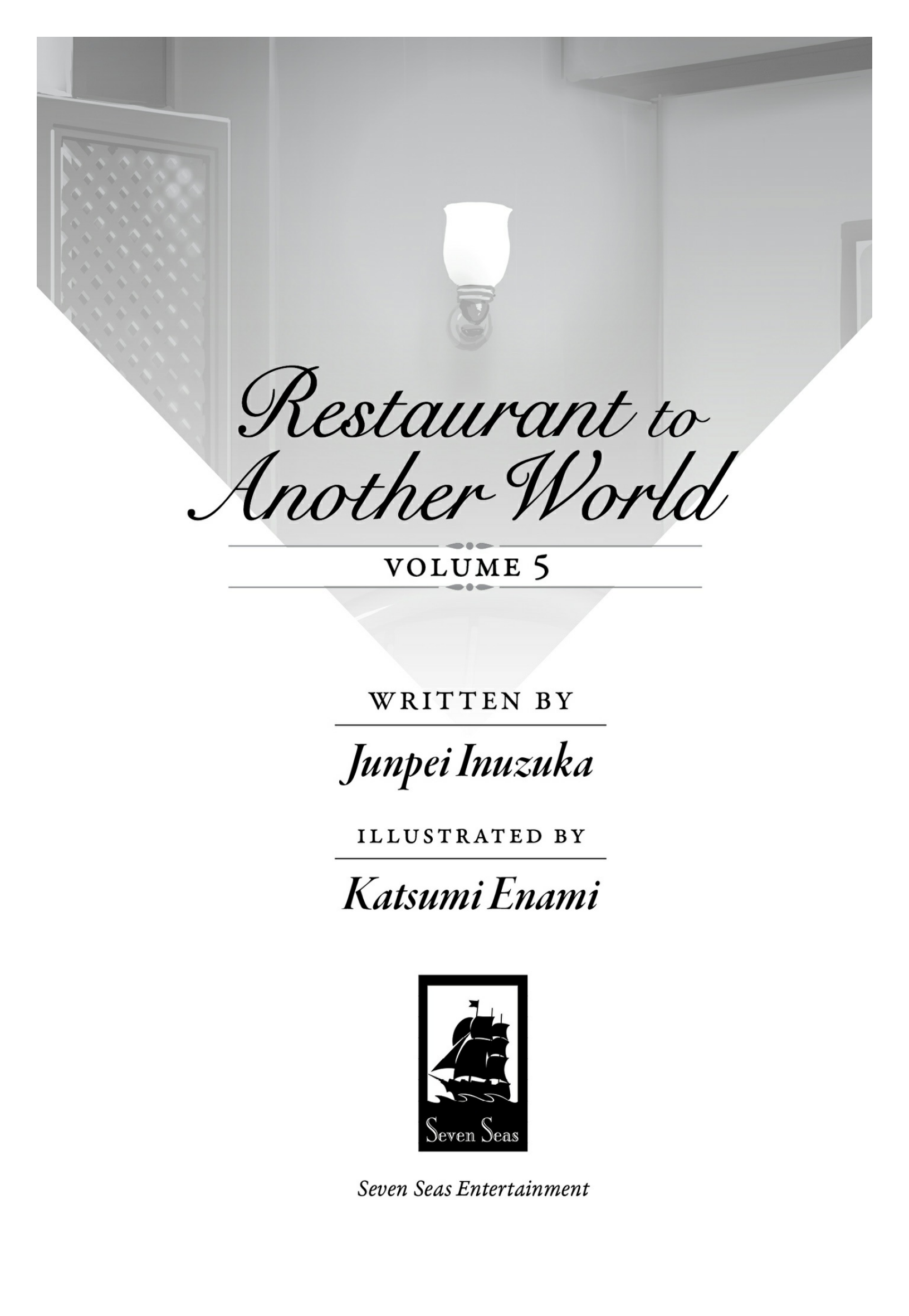
RESTAURANT TO ANOTHER WORLD

Once every seven days, a magical door leading to another world appears. Past the oak door with the cat illustration adorning its front is a mysterious dining room of sorts—bright even at night, warm during the winter, and cool during the summer. People call it the *Restaurant to Another World*.

There, every Saturday is a “Special Business Day.” Royalty, monsters, elves, even dwarves—all are welcome to eat at the Restaurant to Another World, no matter what type of creature.

Having inherited the restaurant’s master key from his grandmother, the master has finally come to a decision. After thirty years of operating the eatery his grandfather passed down, it’s time for a change. However, the restaurant still thrives.

Now, just what sort of fateful meetings are in store this week? The restaurant bell rings, and yet more visitors find themselves faced with something delicious.



Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 5

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ISEKAI SHOKUDO 5

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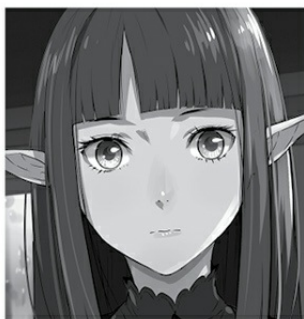
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Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 5

Nekoya's Menu

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Prologue:

The Grand Reopening

One day, sometime after the master's grandmother dropped by to pass down the restaurant's key, Aletta stood before the door to Western Cuisine Nekoya as usual.

"Huh...?"

It was the Day of Satur, but something was weird about the well-kept oak door. A written sign hung from it. Aletta tilted her head, bewildered.

"Er, I'm pretty sure this writing is from my world, right?"

Unfortunately, Aletta couldn't read, so she wasn't sure what the words on the sign actually said. However, she was certain that they weren't letters from Western Cuisine Nekoya's world. Having lived in the capital as long as she had, Aletta was at least familiar with the Eastern Continent's written language. Thus, she recognized the characters on the sign.

"I wonder what's going on?"

Confused by the unfamiliar sign on the door, Aletta placed her hand on the knob and turned it. As the door slowly opened, the sound of bells ringing filled the air.

"Hey! Top of the morning." By this point, the master had a fairly good idea of when Aletta would show up for work, so he always made a point of greeting her with a smile.

As per usual, Aletta was followed by the other waitress who worked at the restaurant on Saturdays.

Good morning.

"Good morning." After trading greetings with the master, Aletta immediately asked him about what was bothering her. "Um, what's with the sign on the door?"

“Ah, I just had a thought is all,” the master responded.

Aletta looked puzzled. Although she hadn’t received a proper education, she was no idiot. The master knew full well that she would ask about the new Saturday-specific sign.

“Well, you know that one regular, right? The old gentleman?” the master asked, nodding. “He taught me a thing or two about writing in your language. The sign reads, ‘Nekoya, the Restaurant to Another World.’”

He gazed down at the pocket where he kept the master key his grandmother had passed on to him. It was a special key that worked in opposition with the bell on Nekoya’s door, enabling the master to cut the restaurant off from the other world forever. Should he choose to end the Restaurant to Another World, he could.

After over sixty years of business, Nekoya had completely and totally fallen into the master’s hands and become his and his alone. When that had finally happened, something had crossed the master’s mind.

“Pretty much anything that ain’t from Japan is ‘western cuisine,’ right?”

That was what the master’s grandfather had always said. He’d been born and raised on the mainland, not in Japan, so he hadn’t really nitpicked when it came to the menu. As long as a dish was delicious, it qualified.

According to what his grandfather had told him, the master’s grandmother was from the “other side.” He’d even heard that his grandfather had found her by the ocean or something. Whether that was actually true, who knew?

The master followed the same creed as his grandfather. Although Nekoya supposedly served western cuisine, he was willing to make any recipe, so long as it was delicious.

“I figured it’d be more inviting to put up a sign that folks from your world understand, rather than some sign that none of you guys can even read. I can’t even imagine how suspicious the door must look when it pops up out of

nowhere over there.”

For years, the master’s grandfather had drawn a line between the “other side” and the world he lived in. The master didn’t intend to reject that way of thinking, but now that Nekoya employed otherworldly workers, he felt that it was appropriate to bend the rules a little.

Why not be more proactive and help bring the two worlds a tiny bit closer together?

“From now on, on Saturdays, this place’ll be ‘Nekoya, the Restaurant to Another World,’” the master explained.

“Wow! Awesome!”

Understood.

The two young women approved of the master’s words, marking the establishment of Nekoya, the Restaurant to Another World.

Chapter 81:

Carbonara

Things weren't looking too hot.

Edmon had served the Kingdom for some thirty years. In a room of the royal palace, he sighed as he received a report from one of his most trusted spies.

"Hrm," he said. "So, there's a strong chance that the imperial princess might marry into the Sand Nation's royal family, then?"

"Yes, sir. This information's very likely correct," the spy explained, nodding at Edmon. "There are already rumors in the imperial capital of large groups from the Sand Nation showing up with the royal prince."

"Understood. You've done well. You may go." After receiving the report, Edmon dismissed the spy.

None of the Kingdom's higher-ups, including the king himself, seemed to think much of the Empire without Wilhelm. But Edmon had served as the head of the Kingdom's intelligence division for many years, and he knew all too well how strong the Empire—in all its oddness—truly was.

"Cursed Empire. What're they up to?" he whispered, a cautious expression on his face.

The Kingdom's citizens had been forced to accept Wilhelm's great Empire. However, the next ruler was nothing more than mediocre. Without the great emperor himself, the Empire was simply a collection of nations full of commoners and savage demons. It stood no chance against the Kingdom's long history of dominance on the Eastern Continent.

However, Edmon thought that this fairly common attitude was foolish. It was true that the Empire was a shadow of its old self. Compared to the belligerent previous emperor—who'd joined hands with a demon king, claimed supremacy over the land, and found great victory in countless battles—the current emperor had led few armies to speak of.

Small skirmishes with monsters and bandits on the borders didn't qualify as true battles. The only genuine combat the current Empire and emperor had seen—a battle to the death with another nation—had taken place some ten years prior, just before Wilhelm's death. After that battle, the Empire had ceased invading other nations. Its leaders directed its massive army to guard its borders instead of participating in actual combat. They farmed cobbler's tubers rather than fighting.

But that wasn't because they lost Emperor Wilhelm. It wasn't even because they lacked leadership.

Edmon felt that it'd be easier, if anything, if the Empire were simply a nation of barbarians. However, they'd changed focus entirely after acquiring cobbler's tubers, dubbed the "crop of the gods" (which was nothing more than propaganda from the Earth God's shrine). Instead of stealing others' fields, the Empire began to claim arid lands where nothing grew and nurture their cobbler's tubers there.

Likely Emperor Wilhelm's last plot. What a terrifying man.

In retrospect, the war the Empire had entered in order to acquire a port made total sense. It had seemed surprising at the time, but really, it was the late Emperor Wilhelm's last gift before his passing. No one doubted the Empire once it stopped waging war on neighboring nations.

The current emperor might have gained all manner of knowledge from Wilhelm, but he didn't know how to lead a massive army. It made sense that he focused on defending his land.

But that's not it. The Empire has simply turned to cobbler's tubers to profit the nation. That's how they're gaining power.

An army was necessary in this day and age. Even in the current time of peace, soldiers had to deal with monsters that simply acted instinctively. It was the army and the knights' job to take care of those creatures. Commoners and merchants had uses for adventurers and mercenaries, but a nation couldn't rely on them.

Thus, there was nothing odd about the Empire maintaining a massive army. On the other hand, that meant they could engage in war as they once had.

The king and noblemen don't understand the danger that lurks in the shadows.

Perhaps it was the current Kingdom that was no more than a collection of nations. Edmon sighed again.

It was said that the Kingdom had come to be when the leaders of lands on the Ancient Kingdom's outskirts formed an alliance. The king had become a lich and used his army of wraiths and demons to wreak destruction throughout the land. The Kingdom had been born through compromise, so although it had power, it lacked unity.

The Duchy's subjects prioritized their leader's words over all else. The Empire had been built off the back of a single man and his incredible talents, so nobody dared to doubt his words and rule. Unlike those nations, the Kingdom utilized the same bloodline system as the Ancient Kingdom. The king was basically the country's most powerful nobleman, which meant that if he wanted to do something, it still had to be negotiated and adjusted. In that sense, there was no way for the Kingdom to keep up with the fast-acting Empire.

Even now, it's not as though we can do anything.

Due to its youth as a nation, the Empire didn't have much of a magic division. The fact that it was partnering with the Sand Nation, whose magic supremacy at least matched the Kingdom's and Duchy's, wasn't good at all.

However, many underestimated the Empire without Wilhelm and focused far more on petty squabbles among themselves. If the Empire chose to act, it'd be too late for any other nation to respond in kind.

What's going to happen to us? Just thinking about it gives me a headache.

Feeling a bit impatient, Edmon decided to gather information. He headed for a research room containing all kinds of historical documents collected since the Kingdom itself was founded.

Hidden within the room was a secret door that only Edmon knew of. Once every seven days, on the Day of Satur, an oak door illustrated with a cat materialized. A sign on its front read, "Nekoya, the Restaurant to Another World."

Edmon quietly walked through the door. The sound of bells echoed deep within the dim research room.

Looking around his new brightly lit surroundings, he met the great sage Altorius's gaze. After greeting him, Edmon sat off to the side, away from prying eyes. That was his usual spot.

Instead of the demon girl—Aletta—Nekoya's black-haired, wraith-like waitress greeted Edmon.

Welcome.

He made his usual order. "A plate of carbonara, please."

Eating a plate of carbonara was Edmon's first move whenever he visited Nekoya. Not even the Alfade Company could make that particular pasta dish.

A plate of carbonara. Just a moment.

The girl returned to the kitchen in the back to relay his order.

After ordering, Edmon slowly surveyed the room. *Now then, let's see who's here today.*

The usual lizardman was present, expressionlessly munching a plate of what was called "omelet rice." Elsewhere was a group of faeries enjoying some sort of pastry. In another area of the restaurant, what looked to be an ogre couple sat on the floor, eating meat and drinking merrily. Edmon also noticed a bronze-skinned lamia with an elegant manner; she chatted away happily with a boy.

As usual, the Gold Firm's young heiress sat eating across from a Duchy knight. An Alfade Company chef sat in the one seat that looked into the kitchen.

A pair of elf sisters sat at another table. The elder was clearly enjoying her meal, although she wore a somewhat frustrated expression.

And then, of course, the great sage was enjoying his golden ale. Everyone in the restaurant seemed to be having a great time.

The situation contradicted Edmon's common sense, but eventually he got used to it and even noticed something: Just by gazing around Nekoya, he could gather all kinds of information. That was something Edmon was tremendously fond of. Information gathering had enabled him to climb the ranks from a noble

civil service agent to a minister.

Edmon's ability to observe was sharp, so there was much for him to gain from Nekoya.

Still, things were different when Edmon visited Nekoya to have a plate of carbonara on his own. He had very little time to himself, so he treasured the chance to enjoy a meal in peace. That let him forget his work.

Thank you for waiting. Here's your carbonara.

"Oh, it's here? Thanks a lot."

The warm aroma of cheese rose to Edmon's nose. Pink meat peeked out from beneath a mixture of eggs and cheese atop the golden noodles. Black pepper decorated the sauce's surface.

Mmm. This is the only way to eat carbonara.

As a man born and raised in the Kingdom, Edmon had a certain attachment to noodles. When he'd only just come of age, the Alfade Company had begun to release all manner of noodle dishes into the world. Edmon remembered how all his coworkers at the time had discussed what was next among themselves.

It's rather ironic that all those noodles basically came from here.

Reflecting on his nostalgic memories, Edmon plunged his fork into the noodles and wrapped a mouthful of the golden deliciousness around the silver utensil. Bringing the fork to his mouth, he found himself enraptured by the cheese's rich scent before taking a bite.

The flavor of the freshly boiled noodles and melted cheese spread through his mouth, making his lips curl into a smile.

The meat's perfect saltiness and grease complemented two different great tastes—the rich flavor of the cheese and that of the eggs. The black pepper's edge lovingly brought all the ingredients together.

The noodles enwrapped and melded into the flavors of the eggs and cheese, creating an incredible combination.

I'll never get enough of this.

Edmon remembered the first time he'd ever indulged in carbonara. He'd never imagined that eggs and cheese could come together so beautifully. However, since the chef used thicker noodles than usual, the cheese flavor didn't overpower the dish. The noodles' wheat taste remained strong.

Now then, next is...

Edmon plunged his knife into the meat and took a bite. Although it was cut into short, thin strips drained of grease and fat, it still somehow managed to be flavorful. The deliciousness was different from the rich cheese flavor his tongue was used to, allowing him to further enjoy his carbonara.

A bite of noodles, a bite of meat, and then another bite of noodles. Just like that, Edmon's plate was empty.

"Whew...excuse me. Could I get a cup of coffee, please?"

After finishing his meal, Edmon always made a point of ordering the other world's bitter tea known as "coffee" so that he could give his tongue a rest.

It's about time that I get back to work.

Satisfied with his carbonara, Edmon turned his thoughts to the task at hand.

Chapter 82:

Roast Beef

Rorona, the Lord of Black's servant and brood member, spread her black wings and bathed in the mercy of her god from up above. She was full of joy.

I'm finally one of the brood!

Up until now, Rorona had been a normal human, incapable of feeling the Lord of Black's energy: the light of night, infused with death's power. She'd had no way of knowing that sunlight—the Lord of White's light, which she passed under every single day—was such a horrible thing.

But now, new to all this as she was, Rorona felt the Lord of Black's power within her.

Oh, great Lord of Black, who lives at the end of our world, I offer you my gratitude. Thank you for blessing me with even an ounce of your amazing power!

Rorona ran her hand across the two small holes in her neck. They proved that she'd completed the ritual required to be one of the brood. She smiled, revealing two sharp fangs in her mouth. Her body wasn't merely that of a weak human follower. No, it had the form of a true believer and brood member who fought the devotees of Chaos and the Lord of White...the form of one who would eventually lead the Lord of Black's followers.

Long, long ago, the Ancient Six—including the Lord of Black—had battled the Million Colors of Chaos in an effort to erase it from this world. In that fierce battle of the gods, the Ancient Six had sustained numerous serious injuries, spilling their blood throughout the world. According to legend, a living being who bathed in the Ancient Six's blood and lived to tell the tale became a brood member.

The brood member gained immortality and sometimes even the awesome power to transform into a dragon. However, there was no way to pass brood powers down via bloodline.

After the battle with the Million Colors of Chaos, each brood member eventually went on to lead the Ancient Six's believers. Despite the brood's immense powers, they couldn't increase their own numbers. Aside from the Lord of Blue's followers—who chose to live deep beneath the ocean—believers in the other gods decreased due to constant battles with other believers, as well as the war against the long-eared invaders, who had no god to speak of. Eventually, they disappeared from the Southern Continent's surface...that is, excluding those in the ocean and the opposing forces of the broods of White and Black.

Since the Lord of White had a deep love for the race known as “humanity,” they occasionally appeared before human children.

A single baby was chosen to accept a portion of the Lord of White's blood. In exchange for living a mortal life like any other, the baby gained the ability to transform into a dragon, marking them as a candidate to become a high priest. That was the birth of a “white child” who served as the Lord of White's representative, bringing together the Lord of White's followers into the strongest brood in all the world.

On the other hand, the Lord of Black's brood could create new members, an ability the other broods lacked. As a result, the Lord of Black's brood was never forced to disappear into the shadows as the others were. They could increase their numbers by sharing their blood, which turned those they were close to into brood members.

When it came to sheer fighting strength, the Lord of Black's brood was slightly weaker than the others. Unless they covered themselves in the Black Dragon's scales, they were largely incapable of fighting beneath sunlight. That was a fatal weakness. After the battle against the Million Colors of Chaos concluded, it was said that the Lord of Black had gone on a journey to the end of the sky, never to be seen again. The Black Brood would live on in the Lord of Black's place, leading their followers.

Among the Lord of Black's followers were individuals capable of mastering a prayer that allowed them to grow dragon scales. Those skilled human priests could eventually become high priests, granting them permission to join the Black Brood. The Lord of Black's followers believed that the day would come

when their children became brood members, faithfully serving the Lord of Black's shrine, which the high priests governed. In exchange for safety, those followers provided the brood with a workforce, as well as the blood required to keep them active.

"Hrm...? I smell something quite appetizing."

Rorona was a talented priest who'd only just undergone the ritual to become a high priestess and brood member. She now had senses far above any human's, so she picked up on the mysterious scent immediately.

"It's coming from over there."

It was faint, but she sensed the Lord of Black's energies gathering.

Rorona quickly spread her wings and traced the aroma's source. The full moon in the sky illuminated the night, making it easy for her to navigate.

At her destination, the moon above lit a single door with a cat plaque on its front. The door was clearly out of place.

"Hmm. What's a door doing here? I just barely sense the Lord of Black's power coming from it."

Rorona brushed her hand against the door's surface, picking up on faint traces of her lord.

Is this some sort of magic?

She sensed the Lord of Black's power within the door, but that power was different from the power of prayer. It didn't take Rorona long to figure out what was so unique about it. The magic in the door required no prayer; it was directly harnessed from within a body or object.

Rorona had learned about that at the shrine. Thousands of years ago, a mysterious race with long ears had invaded the land. Those beings believed in no god, making them enemies of not only the Ancient Six and their followers, but also the followers of the Million Colors of Chaos. The invaders were capable of using something called "magic." Besides those born with magical power, few people on Rorona's continent could use magic themselves.

The Million Colors of Chaos's followers, who believed their lord would one

day return to them, did whatever was required of them to survive. The Lord of Red's followers believed that strength was justice. The Lord of White's followers were weak humans who didn't question the quality of the power they chose to wield. In the battle against the long-eared invaders, there were brood members—even among the Lord of Black's servants—who managed to steal magical techniques and use them for their chosen deity. However, they were few in number.

Still, this has to be a high priest's magic...probably.

Judging by the strength of the spell within the door, Rorona surmised that a high priest wielding powerful Black magic had cast it. In that case, this door was nothing to be scared of, so Rorona opened it.

The sound of bells rang out, and Rorona found herself in a bright room.

Where am I?!

She gazed at her mysterious new surroundings and immediately spotted a follower of Chaos—a young lady walking busily around the room.

Rorona held her breath. How could a follower of Chaos be present in a holy space that a high priest of Black had entered? That was unforgivable. Quickly, Rorona attempted to summon her dragon claws so that she could eliminate the invader.

Stop. There will be no fighting here.

All the power immediately drained from Rorona's body, and she nearly collapsed on the spot. She couldn't resist the mysterious voice. No, she couldn't even *think* to resist it.

Wh-what the...?! What was that?!

Immediately, Rorona looked around the room. The only ones present were a strangely long-eared girl wearing black clothes and a host of other sentient beings wearing outfits Rorona was unfamiliar with. Although they were bizarrely dressed, they were no cause for concern.

“Um, miss? Is something the matter?”

While Rorona had been busy surveying her surroundings, the young follower

of Chaos had drawn close, a puzzled expression on her face.

“H-huh?! Um, not at all! I, uh...ah.”

Rorona’s determination to fight had completely vanished, so she tried to behave casually, only to notice a man and woman sitting nearby.

The pair appeared to have noticed Rorona as well.

“Hrm?”

“Oh, my.”

Unlike Rorona, the couple had pale white skin. They wore bizarrely designed clothes that covered both their arms and legs. Despite that, Rorona sensed who they were, since she’d trained long and hard to become part of the brood.



“Um...er...I’d like to talk to the two people over there,” she told the follower of Chaos. “May I sit with them?”

“Oh, you want to share a table? Let me check real quick.” Slightly confused by the request, the follower of Chaos politely headed off to confirm it.

Ah...maybe she’s not actually a bad person?

That thought crossed Rorona’s mind as she watched the young lady walk away. At the Lord of Black’s shrine, Rorona had been taught to eliminate any and all followers of Chaos on sight. However, she couldn’t find a reason to slay the girl, who didn’t seem like an evildoer.

“I just checked, and Romero and Julietta would love your company. They’d actually like to speak to you as well! Let me take you over to them.”

After being on the receiving end of the young lady’s bright smile, how could Rorona not obediently follow?

“All right. Thank you.” She let the follower of Chaos guide her to the table.

The couple set down their transparent glasses of blood-red alcohol and welcomed Rorona.

“Greetings. What a lovely night it is, yes? We certainly didn’t expect to run into one of our kind here. I am Romero.”

“And my name is Julietta. Forgive me for being rude, but did you just undergo the transformation?”

“Um, it’s a pleasure to meet you both. My name is Rorona. I only recently joined the Black Brood, so there’s much for me to learn.”

Although they were brood members, the pair didn’t seem to be priests. That befuddled Rorona as she returned their greetings.

The man...Romero, was it? He’s probably hundreds of years old.

Romero had likely been alive for quite some time. Did that mean that Julietta was his lover?

As Rorona thought the situation over, Romero shot a question at her. “Hrm. The Black Brood, you say? Rorona, where exactly do you hail from?”

“Huh? Where? Er, the Lord of Black’s capital, of course.”

Rorona was deeply puzzled about why Romero would ask a question like that. Aside from a handful of powerful brood members who could survive in the “outside world,” all others were required to study and train in the capital.

It wasn’t completely unheard-of for brood missionaries to create new members while traveling abroad, but it was fairly rare.

Something about Rorona’s answer seemed to further confuse Julietta. “The Lord of Black, you say? Not the Dark Lord?”

“The Dark Lord? Hrm. While darkness is indeed the Lord of Black’s territory, the Lord of Black is the Lord of Black.”

An unsettling atmosphere hung over the table. Why was Julietta asking such things? Rorona was speaking the truth, and nothing she said went against common sense. So why were the two in front of her so confused?

After a moment of quiet thought, the man raised his eyes as if he’d realized something.

“Wait. Could you be from the Vampire Nation? I didn’t think it really existed.”

Romero’s suggestion took both Julietta and Rorona aback.

“Huh? ‘Vampire’? What’s that?” asked Rorona.

“Oh, my!” added Julietta. “Vampires have their own country? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Romero chuckled at the befuddled women, deciding to tell them a story.

“This is just a tale I heard from some elder vampires who’d lived over a thousand years. Apparently, a long, long time ago, back when the elves were exploring the world and eliminating savage tribes and monsters across the lands, they discovered a nation of vampires. In that country, our kind ruled as nobility, and the human commoners offered blood and labor in exchange for protection.”

“Especially strong humans were chosen to become vampires and nobles,” Romero continued. “According to the tale I heard, lots of vampires lived there. They were even capable of being active during the day, for some reason. The

elves stood no chance against them.”

“Wait.” Rorona wasn’t stupid, so she was able to read between the lines of Romero’s tale. “Perhaps, when you say ‘vampire,’ you’re referring to the Black Brood?”

Putting together everything they’d spoken of up until that point, the “Vampire Nation” was actually the Lord of Black’s territory, where high priests and other leaders covered their bodies in dragon scales to defend against the sunlight. That was also where the Black Brood ruled over humans. Therefore, the “elves” Romero spoke of were likely the long-eared invaders.

“Yes, that seems to be the case,” Julietta agreed. “We call ourselves ‘vampires,’ but you refer to us as the ‘Black Brood.’ Ha ha! It’s a true pleasure to meet you.”

“I know that this is the Restaurant to Another World and all, but I still never thought we’d meet a vampire from the Vampire Nation!” added Romero. “It really is a delight to make your acquaintance.”

One thing was clear: The couple were no enemies of Rorona’s. Once all three of them came to that conclusion, Romero and Julietta revealed their fangs with big smiles.

Rorona responded in kind with a smile of her own, revealing her fangs. “Likewise!” Then she shot a question at them. “By the way, did you call this place the ‘Restaurant to Another World’?”

“Indeed,” said Romero. “As luck would have it, this restaurant exists in another world. It’s a rather strange place, but the food is delightful.”

“It actually has a different name,” Julietta added, “but everyone simply refers to it as the Restaurant to Another World.”

The couple answered succinctly, making Rorona glance down at the food and drink they’d been indulging in before she arrived. Looking at the food on the table, she couldn’t help but voice her honest opinion.

“This undercooked meat is an otherworldly dish?” She tilted her head.

The thinly sliced meat’s outer edges seemed well done, but for some reason,

the center still looked pink. A slew of vegetables sat underneath the meat, and atop it was some kind of juice. In that sense, it certainly looked like a proper meal, but Rorona couldn't help focusing on how undercooked the meat seemed.

"Yes, it's called roast beef," Julietta explained.

"It goes wonderfully with red wine, in fact," Romero added. "If you primarily want a satisfying meal, I recommend the beef steak. But if you're here for the fine drinks, roast beef is perfect. Would you like to join us? I can guarantee its taste."

The couple sitting in front of Rorona vouched for the undercooked meat's flavor.

Well, they seem nice enough, she thought. It would be rude not to try the dish after the pair's recommendation. Picking up the fork that the follower of Chaos had left moments earlier, Rorona stretched her hand toward the roast beef.

When she stabbed her fork into a thin slice of meat, she was surprised to find that it was tremendously tender.

I wonder if this is okay to eat. Rorona mused for a moment about the dangers of ingesting unprepared meat but realized the folly of her thoughts. *Oh, wait. I'm not human anymore, so I should be fine!*

The moment she bit into the tender meat, her eyes widened.

"What the...?!"

It was far from undercooked, although it looked that way to the naked eye. The meat was indeed well done. Its surface was intoxicatingly aromatic, and its center was tender and juicy. Each bite spread more of its salty, spicy juices through her mouth. The roast beef wasn't hard to chew, like undercooked meat. Instead, it was easy to bite through. It was entirely different from fried or boiled meat.

Rorona hadn't known that meat could be prepared like this.

"Well? Surprised?" Watching his fellow vampire react to the roast beef, Romero offered an explanation. "It may look as though it's just been cooked

normally, but that's what makes the food here so fascinating."

Romero had felt the same way as Rorona when he first ate the beef steak at the Restaurant to Another World. The steak looked simple at a glance, but really, the chef had tinkered with it until it was perfect. That was why Romero and Julietta were so fond of this place.

"Now then, please, eat up. If we need to, we can just order more!" Julietta explained with a smile, prodding Rorona to indulge.

The brood member quietly moved the dish of roast beef closer to her, continuing to shovel meat into her mouth. Although the tender beef was cooked through, delicious juices remained inside, exploding into Rorona's mouth with each bite.

The greens' hint of spiciness shot through her nose and melded perfectly with the faintly sour red sauce mixed with the juices. Rorona felt as though she could keep eating the roast beef forever.

"As I mentioned earlier, the roast beef is delicious on its own, but it becomes an entirely different beast when paired with red wine. Please, give it a try." Romero passed his wine glass to the youthful Rorona. She immediately took a sip and found the sour, bitter red drink delectable.

Mmm. This wine's quite good!

It was likely made from some unfamiliar fruit. Rorona agreed that it went quite well with the meat's flavor.

"Ah, excuse me, Aletta, my dear," Romero said to the follower of Chaos. "I'm sorry, but could we have another plate of roast beef? Oh, and some bread as well?"

The trio ate and drank. Midway through their meal, the couple suggested that Rorona try some of the warm, soft, sweet bread—an unfamiliar food. Yet again, it paired amazingly with the roast beef. Rorona was left with a full stomach and an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude.

The Restaurant to Another World, huh? This place is pretty great. And Romero and Julietta are tremendously kind.

Rorona would certainly have to come again, she thought to herself as a smile stretched across her face.

Chapter 83:

Oden

Deep within the mountains, in a huge forest blanketed in white, was a frozen lake that no human or beast dared approach. Near the lake was a small hut with a rather high ceiling, inhabited by a pair of ogres named Tatsuji and Otoru.

The sun had finally risen over the mountain to the east, its light reflecting off the snow, visible to the ogre couple wearing fur clothing.

“Ah—it’s cold. Here.” Tatsuji knelt, shivering from the biting cold outside.

“Thanks a lot.” Otoru clung to his back. He lifted her up as though she weighed nothing at all and began to walk.

Tatsuji and Otoru were of an especially strong ogre breed. That meant that even the fiercest forest beast stood no chance against the pair.

As it happened, the most dangerous foe of any ogre with a family was winter itself, when food on the mountain dried up, beasts thinned and lost their flavor, and even the lake froze over.

Lone ogres usually lived on the mountainside, picking off travelers and samurai and surviving off food they stole from weak humans. However, since the roads were closed in the winter, it wasn’t especially rare to find those ogres’ corpses in the woods come spring, collapsed from cold or hunger.

This year was particularly rough, since Otoru wasn’t in the greatest health. During the fall, the two ogres hadn’t been able to properly prepare for the coming winter, so life had gotten a bit difficult. The one thing they looked forward to every seven days drove them forward.

The couple made their way to the usual door, leaving behind footprints in their wake.

“We’re here. Hop down.”

“Aye.”

Tatsuji let Otora down about three steps from the door and then turned the knob.

The sound of bells ringing echoed as the door opened. A gust of warm air and a delicious aroma blasted the pair. The ogres quickly entered the restaurant.

As they passed through the door, they met Aletta and her usual smile, as well as the black-haired waitress who'd suddenly appeared at the restaurant one day.

"Welcome!"

Welcome.

"Sorry we're here so early," Tatsuji apologized. "We just wanted to warm up a wee bit."

In the summer, the Restaurant to Another World was delightfully cool, and in the winter, it was warm and cozy. The ogres hadn't the slightest idea of how or why that was, but the restaurant was almost always tremendously comfortable. Add in the fact that the food was constantly delicious, and the ogres had something to look forward to during winter months when they barely dared to venture outside.

"Aye, we'll have the usual. Roast chicken and..." Usually Tatsuji indulged in some liquor, but after glancing at his wife, he decided to stick to food this time. "Actually, no booze today. I wanna eat instead. Can we get some rice, too?"

Lately, Otora had become quite kind in her dealings with others. She met the two waitresses' eyes and flashed them smiles before sitting at the usual table. "We'll be stickin' around a while, but we won't cause you any trouble."

"You got it! Hold on for just a bit."

Aletta went back to the kitchen, as always, and left the ogre couple hungry and waiting. After a brief pause, she reappeared with a large plate of rice balls and roasted chicken.

"Sorry for the wait! Here's your order of roast chicken and rice!"

"Aye. Many thanks."

"Thanks, dear. Shall we get to eatin', then?"

Before digging in, the couple couldn't help but smile at the food sitting in front of them. Despite the winter cold, the chicken was still plump and fatty. The ogres bit into it, bones and all, then shoveled the still-warm rice balls into their mouths. The fat on the perfectly cooked roast chicken still had a dash of saltiness that went perfectly with the sweet rice balls.

Normally, they'd wash the roast chicken and rice down with some shochu. Today was different. When it came to eating enough for three, Tatsuji and Otoru preferred to swap alcohol for rice.

As Tatsuji enjoyed his warm meal inside the cozy restaurant, he looked toward a regular who was once again enjoying golden ale.

Didn't that old mage say something once? Tatsuji thought.

He remembered a story the old man had told him. *"There's a customer here who buys food by the pot and brings it home..."*

After filling his stomach with roast chicken and rice, Tatsuji called Aletta over to make a new order.

"Huh?" Aletta repeated the order back. "You want to buy a whole pot of food?"

Tatsuji nodded. "Aye. If I pay y'all, and return the pot next time I come, you can do that, right? If so, could you have the master back there prepare something that'll be delicious even after reheatin' it?"

"Um, all right! Let me just check with the master."

Aletta could tell from the serious expression on Tatsuji's face that he wasn't joking. She quickly left for the kitchen.

Soon after, the master himself came out. "I'll have to start making it now, so it'll take a while. Is that all right?"

"No problem," answered Tatsuji.

"It's nice and warm here," added Otoru. "I'd be glad to relax for a bit."

They nodded at the master.

"Understood." After giving it some thought, the master realized that this was

the first time anyone had ever ordered a whole pot of anything other than beef stew. “In that case, oden would be perfect for this time of year.”

“Aye. We’ll leave it to you.”

“And you needn’t hurry. We’d like to take our time and wait, if that’s all right.”

If the ogres went home now, they’d just have to suffer through the frigid weather. All they had in their hut was cold food on the verge of freezing.

“Of course. Take your time.” After they ordered, the master returned to the kitchen. He started his work on their food while handling other orders.

Once they get home, they’re probably not going to dig in immediately, so I need to think about reheating.

As he simultaneously prepared the ogre couple’s food and other orders, the master wondered whether the pair would even like oden.

“Well, thank you very much!” Aletta and the new waitress saw the couple off to the sound of bells ringing.

“Aye, we’ll be back.”

“See you later.”

Just like that, Tatsuji and Otora were back in the snow-covered forest.

“Ugh. It really is cold.”

“We’re gonna freeze to death out here. Let’s hurry up and get home.”

It wasn’t as frosty as it had been hours before, since the sun had already risen far into the sky. Still, compared to the warm room the ogres had just been in, this felt extra chilly. The couple hurried home.

“I’ll tell ya what, though. It smells damn good,” said Tatsuji.

“You got that right.” Otora held the cloth-wrapped pot close to keep warm. The scent kept rising to her nose. “The old man said it might take the flavors a while to really set, but I’ll be damned if I don’t wanna dig in right now.”

“Wanna give it a little try?”

“Gotta be patient! We’re already full! Let’s wait till the sun sets.”

The pair eventually arrived at their hut and quickly went inside. They closed the door tightly to prevent the winter air from getting in, stoking the furnace in the center of the room.

“Right—how’s about a nap?”

“Sounds good to me. I’m tired after gettin’ up so early.”

Deciding to nap till sunset, the pair climbed under the tiger-and bear-fur covers. It wasn’t long before the sound of snoring began.

Tatsuji and Otoru awoke later that evening, the food from earlier long gone from their stomachs. Realizing that, they wasted no time in preparing the oden they’d purchased.

They unwrapped the large cloth, revealing the big silver pot underneath. Careful not to tip it, they placed it over the furnace.

They placed charcoal around the pot to heat it. The oden didn’t take long to warm up, eventually spreading its appetizing aroma throughout the hut.

“Aye, let’s eat!” As soon as Tatsuji smelled the oden’s aroma, he was ready to dig in.

As he prepared his chopsticks and bowl, Otoru was wise enough to stop him. “Hold yer horses. We gotta wait until it’s all nice and warm.”

“Aw, geez. How much longer?” Tatsuji whined, a smile forming on his face. That “oden” stuff was going to be delicious. Tatsuji could tell as much even before tasting it.

Confirming the boiling sound coming from within the pot, Otoru took off the lid, their bowls ready. “Now we can get to eatin’!”

Warm air smelling of soy sauce and various ingredients blasted the ogre couple, immediately making Tatsuji’s stomach growl. “C-c’mon, now! Let me eat!”

“Aye.”

Otora couldn't help thinking about how, when Tatsuji wasn't locked in battle with beasts or samurai, he could be such a child. She picked a few items out of the pot and placed them in a bowl.

These translucent brown things must be a type of radish. These are boiled eggs. This is...some kind of meatball? But what the heck's this gray thing? Oh, and the thing with the hole in it, too?

As was always the case with food from the Restaurant to Another World, there were ingredients that Otora didn't recognize. Still, she loaded Tatsuji's bowl with food until she finally placed the hot pepper that the master had given them on the bowl's edge. She handed the finished bowl over to Tatsuji.

“Thanks! Let's chow!”

Tatsuji took the bowl in one hand and immediately set his sights upon the meatball, thrusting his chopsticks into it. He placed the meat in his mouth and chewed, causing the chicken's savory flavor and hot juices to flow out.

The juices made Tatsuji blow hot air from his mouth before shouting, “Hot! Hot! This is amazing!”

“You're right,” Otora replied. “It's got me feelin' all nice and warm to boot! Now, this was a good buy!” She watched Tatsuji from the corner of her eye and sipped some of the broth, which was full of various ingredients' juices.

This “oden” dish apparently consisted of all kinds of foods boiled together in one bowl. The whole meal had been carefully put together so that different flavors combined to form an incredible broth.

“Ah! This radish is just delish. It absorbed the broth.”

Radish was typically somewhat spicy when eaten raw. If boiled, it did its job filling one up but didn't have much flavor beyond slight bitterness. However, the radish in this oden stuff was different. After soaking up the delicious broth, it crumbled apart in the mouth. The radish's flavor was drawn out further by the hot pepper, becoming irresistible.

Tatsuji ate the mysterious, triangular gray food in his bowl before sampling

the radish. “If you like that radish, you should check out this gray thing,” he suggested to his beloved. “It’s all jiggly and delicious.”

The strange, triangular gray object was bouncy and soft, but maintained its form. When bitten into, it provided little resistance. Small black dots visible inside made for a very bizarre texture. One thing was certain, however—the odd food was loaded with the savory broth.

Tatsuji had no clue what that thing was made from, or what it was, but he did know that it was damn delicious.

“Yeah, this is great, too,” he agreed. “Whoa. This thing with the hole in it ain’t half-bad, neither!”

The strange food with the hole was apparently one of the many ingredients that contributed to the magnificent broth’s creation. It had a rich flavor and a unique mouthfeel.

It was some sort of meat—one that the pair had never tasted before. However, it was delicious.

“These eggs are good, too. There ain’t many of them, though.”

Tatsuji sliced an egg in half with his chopsticks and brought it to his mouth. The white was soft, but the yolk was fluffy and fragile. The flavors melded nicely with the oden broth.

Some egg yolk crumbled and fell into the bowl of oden beneath, mixing with the broth. When Tatsuji sipped it, its whole flavor profile had changed, reflecting the egg’s taste.

“I can’t take it anymore!” No longer able to hold himself back, Tatsuji grabbed what was left of Otorā’s murky homemade booze, downing it while he indulged in his oden.

“Yeah, I’d like that. Let me have some.”

Otorā gently rubbed her stomach. A little moonshine would be all right.

The oden and booze enhanced one another, and both the food and drink quickly ended up in the couple’s stomachs.

“Whew! That didn’t last very long.”

“When the food’s that good? Of course not. That restaurant’s somethin’ special.”

The pair put their bowls down, having drunk them completely dry. They lay down together.

“Oooh, look how big you’re gettin’!” Tatsuji smiled and gently rubbed his hand over Otora’s stomach.

Reminded of something from long ago, Otora smiled back, explaining her situation to her husband. “You big oaf. I’ve still got a ways to go. That’s what my mother said, anyhow. After getting pregnant, it takes about a year.”

Chapter 84:

Teriyaki Burger

Tatsugorou didn't take his eyes off the wraith as it hissed and collapsed to the ground, eventually vanishing into thin air.

"It's finally over," he sighed. He cleaned his katana with a leather rag and sheathed it.

Wraiths were made of magical power and the grudges of those who'd passed on, so they didn't possess physical bodies. That meant that normal blades had no effect on them. Beginner adventurers and mercenaries were wise to avoid crossing paths with wraiths, since a sword without magical enhancements wasn't capable of cutting them.

However, among those who practiced the blade were masters capable of infusing their swords with killing intent. That allowed them to cut through even the grudges of the dead.

Tatsugorou, who'd spent decades refining his sword skills, was one such master. After a sigh of relief, the master samurai turned to confirm that the three young adventurers behind him were unharmed.

"Are you okay, young ones?"

The first to respond was a young warrior who looked to have only just come of age. The warrior wore leather armor that was less than ideal, and his hand held a thick sword that reminded Tatsugorou more of a hatchet.

"You really saved our bacon, pops!" he said energetically. "For some reason, we couldn't even cut that dang thing—and when it touched us, we couldn't move anymore! I seriously thought we were done for."

Given his tone of voice, the warrior was clearly a clever young man, but the veteran samurai could tell that he was trembling ever so slightly. As inexperienced as the young warrior was, even he could tell that he'd dodged a fatal encounter.

The next to speak up was a young man clad in tough robes designed for a long journey. He held a leather book in one hand and a staff in the other, looking something like a mage.

He offered words of gratitude to the samurai. “We got lucky. Thank you so much. I honestly didn’t think that the necromancer was skilled enough to summon a wraith.”

The last young man to speak looked slightly older than the other two. He wore a high-quality steel breastplate over his well-crafted cloth armor, and in his hand was a steel sword clearly made by a talented blacksmith. He appeared to be a young knight.

“We’re grateful for your assistance. Judging by your appearance, the strange blade you wield, and the fact that you cut through a wraith without infusing your weapon with magic, are you...?”

It seemed as though he’d caught on to who Tatsugorou was.

Let’s see, Tatsugorou thought. One of them is a former tough guy, another is a noble who learned the way of the sword, and one is a mage-in-training... Wait.

The samurai tilted his head, suddenly realizing that he’d met these young men before. That served as a painful reminder that a person’s memory was one of the first things to go with age. Tatsugorou focused his energy into trying to remember where he’d encountered the three travelers.

“Mmm...my blade exists to help those in need. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I’m Tatsugorou, a wandering swordsman.”

The liveliest young man immediately reacted to Tatsugorou’s name, his eyes sparkling wildly. “Oh man, I knew it!” Apparently, he was familiar with Tatsugorou and his exploits.

Come to think of it, that one fried shripe fellow... Ah!

As Tatsugorou recalled a knight he’d met several years ago—a regular at the restaurant—he immediately realized where he’d seen the trio in question. “I remember now! You kids used to visit the Restaurant to Another World, right?”

The three young men looked at each other with surprise and then turned to

the samurai.

“Pops—er, Tatsugorou!—you know about the Restaurant to Another World?!” It appeared that the young warrior was the leader of the three.

“Jack, don’t be rude! He’s...” The eldest young man tried to get his friend, apparently named Jack, to take it down a notch.

“No worries. I’m but a simple mercenary. No more, no less.” Tatsugorou said. He recalled his original objective. “Today’s the Day of Satur, so I was on my way to a certain restaurant. Would you all care to accompany me? I’d be happy to treat three young men such as yourselves.”

Immediately, the trio looked at Tatsugorou and nodded in tandem.

The young adventurers made Tatsugorou think back on his own youth, when he’d left his homeland, no wife or child to speak of. It warmed his heart.

They are indeed young. If I had a son—no, a grandson—would he have been like them?

A sense of nostalgia overcame Tatsugorou as the sound of bells ringing filled the air.

“Welcome!” said Aletta. “Huh? Tatsugorou, you’re with Jack and the others today?”

Tatsugorou and the three young adventurers—the leader was the warrior Jack, the mage was Cane, and the well-dressed one was Terry—immediately returned Aletta’s greeting.

“Indeed,” said Tatsugorou. “Call it a twist of fate.”

“It’s been a while, Miss Aletta!”

“I’m glad that you look to be in good health!”

“Ever since we became adventurers, we haven’t been able to drop by! I’m glad that things have been going well here!”

Seeing the trio interact with Aletta reminded Tatsugorou that it’d been some time since his last visit.

Today, on the Day of Satur, Tatsugorou had been near a door. He always treated the restaurant as someplace he swung by if he happened to be in the area. That meant that, if his luck was bad, he'd go months without visiting. That was the kind of place the Restaurant to Another World was to Tatsugorou.

"In that case, let me take you to your usual table!" said Aletta.

She guided the four of them into the restaurant. The young adventurers looked around nostalgically, happily noticing things that had changed since their last visit.

"Huh? Is it just me, or is there another waitress now?"

"You're right! Um...is she an elf?"

"Looks like it. I've never seen one before."

Tatsugorou watched the adventurers from the corner of his eye and felt a bit of nostalgia himself. *That's right. I was just like them when I first began my journey.*

As a young man, Tatsugorou had lived his life in his room, shamed by the knowledge that he would not succeed his father as the head of the house. One day, he heard a story from a traveling bard. It was the tale of a hero who'd traveled east and fought demons—a hero who'd killed one of the demon kings the Shrine of Darkness was so proud of.

Tatsugorou had wanted to be like the hero, so he'd taken his sword in hand, left his home without any money, and made his way to the ocean. There, he'd found work on a boat's crew and sailed across the open seas. He'd made his way to this continent some decades ago.

Yet, despite his age, Tatsugorou remembered that first adventure well.

Heh! I suspect that these youngsters will grow to be fine adventurers. Hmm...?

As the samurai reflected on his past and the trio's future, he absentmindedly flipped through the menu—only to see a dish he didn't recognize. Its name was somehow incredibly tantalizing.

"What is this?" he asked the young adventurers. "A 'teriyaki burger'?"

The trio had also stumbled upon the new dish and were currently discussing

it.

“Sounds a lot like a hamburger to me. What kind of food is it?”

“Who knows? It’s impossible to tell what a dish here is based on the name alone.”

If they didn’t know what the “teriyaki burger” was, the answer was simple—just ask. Tatsugorou called over the passing Aletta. “Excuse me, young waitress. Might I have your time?”

“Of course! What is it?”

“What sort of dish is this teriyaki burger? Judging by its name, I’d surmise it’s something similar to teriyaki chicken.”

Aletta took a moment to think, recalling the words the master had told her during one of their recent taste tests.

“Um...the teriyaki burger is a new addition to the menu, courtesy of the master. It’s a hamburger steak with teriyaki sauce, complete with vegetables and mayo, squeezed between two halves of a bun.”

All four men at the table reacted to her answer. It was a brand-new dish that included all their favorite foods. How could they not be interested?

“Is that so? That sounds tantalizing indeed,” Tatsugorou said. “In that case, I’ll take one. I’d also like a cold tea to go with that.”

After Aletta’s explanation, the young men wasted no time copying Tatsugorou’s order.

“Me, too! Me, too! Just hearing you describe it makes me want one!”

“Same here, please. Oh, and I’d like a cola with that, thank you.”

“Likewise!”

“No problem! I’ll be right out with your food,” Aletta responded, heading to the kitchen.

I can’t wait to see what comes out, Tatsugorou thought. A wave of anticipation for the unknown food washed over him.

While waiting for the teriyaki burgers, Tatsugorou and the trio of young

adventurers engaged in pleasant conversation.

“Wait, you’re *the* Tatsugorou?!”

Jack—who looked as though he’d been probably something of a troublemaker as a child—couldn’t help but raise his voice in surprise at discovering that Tatsugorou was the very man he’d heard about in bards’ tales his whole life.

“Yes, although I’d advise you not to take the tales about me too seriously. I still remember the day I heard that I’d supposedly taken down dozens of trolls all by myself. I wanted to shout ‘Complete crap!’ into the sky.”

Tatsugorou wore a pained smile after responding to the young man. The mercenary had only taken down eight trolls that day. It was embarrassing enough to hear about himself in song, but it was even more embarrassing to have his victories exaggerated. That had happened more than once or twice.

“I heard rumors that the only swordsmen who could take down a wraith without using prayer or magic were Alexander the Blade God and you. I can’t believe it’s true,” Cain said, staring down at the sheathed sword at Tatsugorou’s waist with great interest. He was the thinnest adventurer of the bunch, and his eyes glistened with the light of knowledge, just like a true mage’s.

“That’s not true,” Tatsugorou said. “A long time ago, an elf acquaintance of mine infused this sword with magical energy so that it could cut through otherworldly beings. That’s why I can attack wraiths and spirits and the like. Anyone could do that with this sword, with a bit of training.”

“I see.” Cain nodded, satisfied with the serious answer Tatsugorou supplied.

Terry—who seemed to be of slightly higher upbringing than his companions, and most closely resembled a knight—gazed around the bright room. “I never expected you of all people to be a regular here.”

“Mmm. I certainly didn’t expect you young rascals to suddenly disappear and become adventurers, either,” Tatsugorou replied. “Meeting the unexpected in unexpected places—this is why adventurers never fail to fascinate.”

As a long-standing Nekoya regular, Tatsugorou didn’t often run into the restaurant’s other regulars in the outside world. That was why this particular happy little accident was such a fascinating thing.

As the four continued to chat away, Aletta brought out their teriyaki burgers, tea, and colas. “Sorry for the wait! Here are your teriyaki burgers and drinks!”

“Mmm! Many thanks. Now then, gentlemen, today’s feast is on me,” Tatsugorou announced to the table as the scent of teriyaki sauce found its way to their noses. Not that he needed to say anything, since the young men’s eyes were already glued to the food in front of them. “Make sure to dig in before it gets cold.”

The adventurers nodded at Tatsugorou’s declaration, and their little feast began in earnest.

Sitting atop their pure-white plates were fries—no doubt the side dish—and the teriyaki burgers. Otherworldly vegetables and an off-white sauce were sandwiched between two pieces of light brown bread peppered with some kind of white seeds. Underneath the vegetables was the star of the burger: the slightly charred, disc-shaped patty.

The burger’s steam rose into the air. A small, soft napkin was set beneath it.

The seasoning appears to be the same as that used to make teriyaki chicken.

Tatsugorou grabbed the burger off his plate, the sauce dripping off the meat inside. The sweet scent of teriyaki immediately found its way to his nose.

As he enjoyed the aroma, he held the burger with the supplied napkin and took a single bite.

Oh, this is indeed something.

As Tatsugorou bit into the burger, the first thing he noticed was the seed bread’s gentle sweetness. Its toasted surface was crispy, and its insides’ gentle flavor made for a delightful mouthfeel.

Next, the fresh cabbage and oranie supplied a crunchy sensation as he bit into them. Otherworldly cabbage lacked any bitterness or rawness, instead providing a wonderful crunchiness to any dish. The fresh, thinly sliced oranie added spiciness that melded well with the cabbage.

Of course, the sweet teriyaki sauce, and the white sauce’s gentle sourness, brought out the vegetables’ flavor.

If I remember correctly, this white sauce is called mayo.

Mayo was a condiment that a certain group of Restaurant to Another World regulars swore by. Tatsugorou himself wasn't particularly used to its taste, but even he recognized that it helped to bring out the meat's flavor.

I knew it. The meat's definitely the main attraction.

Since the three youngsters said that the teriyaki burger resembled the hamburger they so adored, it likely included the same kind of meat. After mincing the meat, the master had probably reshaped it into some sort of ball and flattened it before cooking it. Once meat was minced, it gained a certain tenderness; it was also moist.

This tender meat is just wonderful.

Occasionally, Tatsugorou's teeth collided with something he imagined was probably a soft piece of bone, ground down and mixed into the meat. The bone pieces were crunchy and delicious.

This minced meat pairs amazingly well with the flavor of teriyaki.

The teriyaki sauce's sweet, but rather strong, flavor didn't overpower the moist cooked meat. Instead, the juxtaposition of the two flavors created the dish's deliciousness. Add to that the two pieces of aromatic bread and the various vegetables sandwiched between them, and the teriyaki burger became a complete experience.

Mmm. This really is delicious.

For a while, Tatsugorou simply focused on eating his teriyaki burger and munching away at his fries, taking a sip of cold tea every now and then.

It was then that he had a thought. *The teriyaki burger is indeed delicious, but...*

"I'd love to try this with rice."

The words simply fell out of Tatsugorou's mouth. The burger was scrumptious with bread, and since crossing continents, he no longer had any problem eating the stuff. But at the end of the day, teriyaki paired especially well with rice as far as Tatsugorou was concerned.

"Yeah, I bet! This thing's delicious, but I think I still prefer the regular old

hamburger.”

“Really? I think this is way better. Yeah, I’ve got a new fave!”

“The meat alone is its own feast. Heck, I wouldn’t mind just having that!”

Finishing their respective meals at around the same time as Tatsugorou, the trio of adventurers gave their thoughts on the new menu item.

Sometimes it’s nice to have company.

Ready to make the next order, Tatsugorou called the waitress over.

This time, I’ll ask the master to make the burger with rice. I seem to recall something like that showing up as a daily special in the past.

Tatsugorou watched from the corner of his eye as his young companions prepared their orders, thinking about his own next dish all the while.

Chapter 85:

Oil Sardines

Among the Sea Nation's countless islands was a single island where dwarves resided. A massive volcano spit blazing-hot fire from the very top of the island's center.

Though they couldn't grow rice, the dwarves could mine for steel. For many years, they'd exchanged their steel goods for food and charcoal.

This island had but a single hot spring. There, the female dwarf elder Meifan rested, soothing her aching muscles. She let out a sigh of relief as the spring's heat washed over her.

"Now, this is the life."

Before her eyes, a steel-colored sunset extended out beyond the horizon. That light signaled that Meifan would be spending her night in the small mountain cottage near the spa.

This particular spring's powers allowed it to relieve physical pain. However, the spring was a tad far from Meifan and the other dwarves living at the foot of the mountain. That's why there were rarely any visitors besides the elderly, who'd retired and had free time to spare, and those who were ill.

By Meifan's age, she'd already gotten married, raised children, and even had great-grandchildren of her own. She made a point of commuting to the spring specifically to soothe her aches and pains. She came up the mountain once every seven days, soaked in the hot spring, and spent the night.

"I suppose it's about time that I head out, then."

Meifan, now nice and warm, hadn't eaten anything since the porridge she'd made at the mountain cottage earlier. She rose from the hot spring, wrapped her wrinkled body neatly in a towel, and changed into her clothes.

She was headed to her favorite place at this hot spring.

Indeed, this hot spring had a secret, of sorts. An oak door with a cat illustration was located within the woods a little way from it. Once every seven days, the door appeared in the middle of that wild area and connected Meifan's world with an otherworldly bar. This was one of the reasons she made a point of visiting every week.

Excitement building in her heart, Meifan stretched her arm out and grabbed the golden doorknob, turning it. As she pulled the door open, she was greeted by the sound of bells ringing and bathed in light from the room within.

The moment Meifan entered, she was welcomed by the master, a smiling man who looked to be around her own age. "Oh, hey! Wanna start things off with a beer?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. I'm dying for a drink," Meifan responded, nodding as she climbed a chair slightly too tall for a dwarf her size.

Having only just finished bathing, her body was still warm, so the cold air in the restaurant felt pleasant on her skin. "Whew! It's nice and cool in here."

As usual, the restaurant was mostly empty, aside from an older gentleman eating fried pork with his beer and a middle-aged samurai having some kind of chicken alongside his seishu. It was quiet.

If I ever brought my guys here, this place'd be a mess, Meifan thought. It wouldn't be worth it.

Male dwarves loved alcohol. Drenched in sweat from smithing, they'd eat huge quantities of food and drink hard liquor, yelling at the top of their lungs.

If those dwarves ever heard about this wonderful place with nothing but the most delicious foods, they'd probably rush the door and empty it out. That was exactly why Meifan kept the restaurant a secret just for herself.

As Meifan thought about the worst-case scenario, the master returned with her beer in hand. The beautiful yellow-and-white drink had been poured into a completely transparent mug.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your beer."

“Thanks a lot,” responded Meifan, who chugged the beer immediately. The bitter flavor washed down her throat, both refreshing and shocking her system, before eventually ending up in her stomach.

“Ho ho! You sure know how to drink.” The master watched her empty out her mug. He was as impressed as always, especially since he didn’t drink himself.

“Believe me, this isn’t anything,” replied Meifan with a smile. She handed the empty mug back to the master.

A typical trip to the restaurant saw her start with a single beer and then move on to food. That was how she made the most of her once-a-week pleasure.

“Do you have any recommendations for what to have with my drink today?”

“Lemme see.” The master took a moment to think. “Actually, ya know, I got a request to make some oil sardines. They’re a type of fish. Care to give ’em a try?”

A new tenant had recently rented part of the restaurant’s building. They’d requested that the master make oil sardines because they wanted to sell the dish at their joint. It was the perfect season for sardines, so the master decided to whip some up. After taste-testing them the day before, the tenant had given the sardines high marks.

They’d be perfect to serve to an older woman from the other world.

“Sardines? Well, I’m pretty used to eating fish, and the stuff you serve here’s always nice and fresh. Can’t go wrong! Sure, get me some of them.” Taking the master’s suggestion, Meifan also ordered the alcohol she only had access to at the restaurant. “Oh, and do you have any umeshu? I’d love a bottle.”

“Aye, no problem.”

The master returned to the kitchen to prepare Meifan’s order. Fortunately, oil sardines didn’t take long to serve once they were ready. He immediately came back out with a plate in hand, placing it in front of her.

“Hmm. These be the oil sardines or whatever?” Meifan confirmed with the master.

A plate of tiny gutted fish sat in front of her. They were lightly cooked, based

on their color. Sitting atop them was thinly cut oranie. Next to the fish was a bottle of bright yellow-and-white something or other, a bottle of red stuff, and a small bottle full of some sort of black liquid.

“Aye! Homemade, at that. They’ve got chili peppers—er, chili pepels and garlik in them as well.”

Taking a moment to explain what the dish was, the master pointed to the assorted condiments on the table.

“These are for some extra flavor. You got mayo, ketchup, and soy sauce. They all pair well with sardines. Oh, and sardines also go great with rice and bread. So if you want some, just lemme know.”

Last but not least, the master placed a glass bottle of yellow liquid on the table, along with a small glass and an ice bucket. “Here’s your umeshu.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Meifan’s eyes narrowed instinctively as she looked at the alcohol. Umeshu was a sweet-and-sour alcohol unique to the other world, made by pickling lots of otherworldly fruit. It was Meifan’s absolute favorite.

“Enjoy!” The master nodded slightly and returned to the kitchen.

Meifan watched him from the corner of her eye and then began to dig in. “I suppose I should give these sardines a try first.”

She reached out with her chopsticks and grabbed one of the small fish, along with several thin oranie slices.

Let’s see what it tastes like without any seasoning. The fish itself was extremely soft, nearly falling apart in her grip. *Oh, wow. This smells wonderful. I can tell he used high-quality oil.*

The fish was absolutely soaked in oil, yet didn’t smell like it. A very slight but pleasant aroma came from the lightly broiled fish, but the scent wasn’t the least bit oily. That was the ultimate sign of its quality.

Yeah, this looks delicious.

Her expectations appropriately raised, Meifan took a bite of fish. She smiled as those expectations were surpassed.

Oh, my. It's so tender and delicious.

When dwarves ate fish, they typically devoured the entire thing whole, bones and all. That wasn't something everyone could do. However, these sardines were different. Anybody could eat them without having to worry about chewing tough bones.

Since single sardines were so small, there was little doubt that they were full of tiny bones, yet it wasn't unpleasant biting into one.

Did the master debone them? No, he just cooked them so that the bones were as tender as the rest of the fish!

The sardines' savory flavor put a big smile on Meifan's face. *These really are something else. A feast all on their own.*

They were seasoned with salt, chili peppers, and garlic. The spicy, salty flavors melded with the fish's savory fat to form a delightful medley.

Each bite Meifan took released the fish's oily, savory juices into her mouth. The orange topping the sardines was barely cooked, lending the dish a crunchy mouthfeel on top of an extra dash of spiciness.

At first glance, these sardines looked like any other fish. However, they were really their own special feast that the master had worked hard on.

I wonder whether I could make these? Hrm...that's probably impossible.

As Meifan enjoyed the sardines, she reached for the condiments: the salty soy sauce, the tangy ketchup, and the mayo with its gentler sourness. Meifan knew them well. She applied the seasonings to the fish in front of her and began to eat again.

The sardines she'd bathed in soy sauce gained a saltiness that brought out their flavor. They would probably go great with rice.

The ketchup's sour taste paired perfectly with the sardines' greasiness, making Meifan crave more.

Then there was the mayo. That slightly sour condiment was quite the match for the sardines. Both were extremely oily, yet they didn't clash. Instead, the flavors seemed to hold hands and skip their merry way down the road together

like best friends.

Whew! Now that I've tried them all...

With Meifan's stomach full, it was time to indulge in some fine drink. She reached over to put a large ice cube into her glass and then poured herself some umeshu.

As she did, the liquor's fruity aroma filled the air around Meifan. She sipped from the glass.

"H-hey! Wait a second! Come here!" Meifan shouted for the master, who seemed altogether startled. "What's with this stuff?! Is it just me, or is it even better than it was last time?!"

The umeshu was indeed more flavorful than the previous time she'd had some. Its aroma was stronger, and although its flavor was as sweet as ever, it also had a strong sour element. On the whole, the umeshu tasted much gentler, and it was easier to drink than ever before.

"Oh, you taste the difference? Wow, I'm surprised! I suppose folks who know, know."

The master didn't drink, so while he was startled that Meifan could tell that something had changed, he believed her.

He thought about the new tenant from the other day. *I guess that guy knows how to walk the walk and talk the talk. You gotta, if you're gonna start up a bar in times like these.*

After looking at various properties, the new tenant had made the Nekoya Building his location. Since the master had agreed to make snacks and deliver them to his floor, the tenant had signed a contract and used his retirement money to open a bar on the second story.

Before destroying his liver, the new tenant had apparently traveled all over the world, partaking in various liquors from different countries. That was his line of work. After spending some twenty years doing that for his company, he'd become quite the savant when it came to alcohol.

Even though the doctors had told him he could no longer drink, he realized

that he still wished to be involved with alcohol somehow. Inspired by one of his favorite manga, which was about a certain bar, he wanted to serve unique, delicious drinks and make customers happy. Thus, he'd decided to open a bar himself. Judging by Meifan's reaction to his umeshu, he was the real deal.

"Ah, well, I actually get my umeshu supply somewhere else now. The price is just about the same, but the drink's apparently much higher quality."

"Is that so? I was wondering why the umeshu was so much better all of a sudden!" The master's explanation satisfied Meifan. There was always something better out there.

What a shock. Even the other stuff was way more delicious than anything I'd made before.

Meifan had first come across the Restaurant to Another World and indulged in the delicious drink known as umeshu about five years ago. Inspired, she'd tried to make her own. She'd grabbed still-green fruits from her island, washed them, and pickled them in the brandy that dwarves loved to make. Then she'd mixed in lots of brown sugar brought in from outside the island and let it sit for half a year.

The men had thought the umeshu was too sweet and not strong enough, but it was a hit among the women, youngsters, and human merchants who came to the island to trade goods. Eventually, young women and wives had started coming to Meifan to ask her for the recipe, and the merchants who'd once come only for metal goods began requesting entire shipments of the stuff, promising to buy it at a high price.

At the end of the day, however, Meifan's umeshu didn't come close to the version the Restaurant to Another World served.

He's got me. I'm never gonna be satisfied with the flavor of mine if I don't work harder.

Meifan quietly made up her mind as she drank the delicious alcohol. She wanted to brew even more delectable umeshu while she was still alive and kicking.

"Master! Can I get another bottle of the good stuff?" Meifan ordered an

additional round, doing her best to memorize the flavor.

Chapter 86:

Croquettes, Once More

Alphonse, a former Duchy admiral, had a daily training regime. It took place in the garden of a small mansion on the capital's outskirts. After hearing of a certain special guest in the city, however, Alphonse trained more intensely than usual.

He dodged a seemingly endless number of staff attacks while awaiting his opportunity to strike. Despite his age, Alphonse was still said to be one of the toughest warriors in all the Duchy. Even now, he was strong enough to trade blows with the Duchy's most powerful knight—the captain of the Royal Knights himself.

Alphonse watched the youthful older man in front of him, who was ready and waiting with staff in hand.

The captain lacked any particular skill with the spear-shaped staff designed for attacking limbs. However, he did have youthful power, and he'd built up a fierce strike through raw training. If this were a real fight, not practice, Alphonse would likely have given up one of his arms to create a chance to attack the captain—a fifty-fifty shot at winning.

A warrior who doesn't know what growing old feels like can be trouble.

The spear-user in front of Alphonse looked exactly as Alphonse had while he was a knight-in-training. Seeing the captain's fierce attacks, Alphonse remembered the words that had circulated among mercenaries and adventurers. *Beware long-eared warriors. Don't judge a book by its cover.*

Elves and half-elves lived significantly longer than humans and often kept their young appearance despite their age. Occasionally, elf and half-elf mercenaries and adventurers with tremendous sword and bow skills appeared. They used their long lives to sharpen their skills.

Humans would have aged, and lost their speed and strength, by the time they sharpened those skills. However, elves and half-elves didn't have to fear that.

Their training and combat across countless battlefields resulted in near-perfect warriors, with skills born of long years of experience and the strength of youth.

The half-elf former admiral in front of Alphonse, who was likely in his hundreds, was one such warrior.

Like hell I'm just going to take a knee, though!

The fact that Alphonse felt his own body tiring, and that the man in front of him had showed no sign of slowing down since their match began, lit a fire in Alphonse's soul. He'd survived twenty years on that island. He'd fought twenty hard years to make it home. He had no intention of simply putting down his weapon.

On the other hand, his half-elf opponent saw that Alphonse refused to quit and understood the meaning of that. He changed from a stance meant to counterattack Alphonse's flurry to one meant to land a decisive hit on his opponent.

And then...

"A tie it is."

"Indeed, it appears to be a draw."

The pair smiled at one another, each one's weapon pointed directly at the other man's neck.



After washing the sweat off themselves, the pair chatted.

“That was a magnificent training session, as expected of the Empire’s proud Shield,” Alphonse said with a smile to the half-elf man sitting across from him.

The half-elf—Elmer was his name—wore sturdy, if not extravagant, clothing. He had once been an admiral who could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Empire’s fierce Sword, the Demon King Altina. Elmer had originally been tasked with guarding Adelheid’s palace, but thanks to his past deeds, the young Emperor Wilhelm had promoted him. Although Elmer wasn’t a flashy warrior, his strong sense of tactics and the time he’d spent practicing spear skills meant that he’d soon become a symbol of the Empire’s might.

“You flatter me, my friend. After stepping down, I’ve had nothing to do but train.”

“Still, color me surprised. If you chose to, you could still serve as an admiral, even now,” Alphonse responded to Elmer’s somewhat bitter smile.

Alphonse was curious. As far as he could tell, Elmer had barely aged a day. The half-elf’s wits and skills were still about him, making him more than capable of serving as an admiral.

“Imperial law. It was set in place when I decided to serve in the army. All admirals and ministers must retire after serving for fifty years,” Elmer replied, a scornful smile still on his face.

That law didn’t mean much to humans. After fifty years, any average human would age naturally and retire. But there were exceptions to the law’s suitability. Elmer, the half-elf sitting in front of Alphonse, was one of those very exceptions. His best days would last over a hundred years, which meant that he could’ve held his position without ever retiring—or, at least, for as long as he had the strength to serve.

“Ah—I get it.” Alphonse nodded. “The law’s in place to prevent a second coming of the Ancient Empire, eh?”

Alphonse hadn’t known that the Empire had such laws, but it didn’t take him long to figure out why they’d been passed. After all, the Duchy had been founded as a result of a half-elf king taking over and destroying the Ancient

Kingdom. It wasn't difficult to see what the Empire had been afraid of when they'd developed the laws.

When Alphonse had returned from his twenty years of solitude on the island, the first thing he'd done was report his return to the king. Next to the king was Elmer, who hadn't aged a day. He looked exactly the same as he had when Alphonse had first visited the king another twenty years prior to that.

"Exactly. So, now I'm no longer an imperial admiral. I'm just a vagabond. Even my sons pretty much consider me dead," Elmer said almost proudly, as if he were finally free.

His expression was that of a man enjoying the here and now, free from his old position's responsibilities.

"Is that so? In that case, allow me to celebrate your retirement tomorrow, Sir Elmer."

Seeing the expression on Elmer's face sincerely made Alphonse want to celebrate. And, as luck had it, the Day of Satur was just around the corner.

The sound of bells ringing echoed through the room, and Alphonse brought Elmer into the restaurant.

The latter curiously looked at his surroundings. "What a mysterious place."

As an imperial admiral, Elmer had seen all sorts of sights, but he'd never heard of Nekoya.

After finishing breakfast earlier in the morning, Elmer had set out on horseback with Alphonse. Around lunchtime, they arrived at the ruins of a village in the middle of nowhere. A beautiful door with a cat plaque stood within that relic of the past.

Once the two had passed through the door, they'd found themselves in a strange room. According to Alphonse, this was the Restaurant to Another World.

"Welcome! Let me take you to your seats."

As Elmer looked around, a demon girl—likely a waitress—guided them to a

table.

“Glad to be here. I’ll be having the usual. One plate, for now. Oh—and could we get a menu?” Alphonse, clearly used to eating here, asked the relatively new waitress as he and Elmer sat down.

“I get the same thing every time I come here,” he told Elmer. “Feel free to take your time and pick something out.”

With those words, Alphonse went quiet to allow his companion to select a dish. Curry rice was unique; he didn’t want to force it on Elmer, since it was the half-elf’s first time at Nekoya.

Elmer slowly flipped through the oddly smooth book of dish names and descriptions.

Now then, what should I order? Oh—they have all manner of imperial dishes here.

Elmer’s eyes found various familiar imperial recipes. He remembered how—from when he was just a child who knew little of the world, all the way until the day he’d said goodbye to his beloved Emperor Wilhelm—the empire’s former ruler had brought home countless cobbler’s tuber dishes.

Seeing that one of those concoctions was today’s special made ordering easy. “All right. I know what I’m ordering.”

“Excellent. Young lady, we’d like to order.”

“Of course! One moment, please.” The waitress from earlier made her way over.

“I’ll have a large curry rice. How about you, Sir Elmer?”

“Oh...um...I’ll have the daily special,” Elmer said. “The croquette set.”

“Okay,” said the waitress. “So, that’s one large order of curry rice and one croquette set. Um, would you like bread and soup with your croquette set, sir?”

“Yes, that’ll be fine.”

After confirming the pair’s orders, the waitress smiled. “I’ll be back with your food shortly!” she said, returning to the kitchen to deliver the orders.

The two men watched her vanish before speaking again.

“The croquette set, eh?” Alphonse remarked with a gentle expression in his eyes, almost as if nostalgically staring into the distance.

“Yes. Before I left the Empire, I ate croquettes frequently. I never expected to find the same dish here, of all places,” replied Elmer, unable to read Alphonse’s gaze.

To Elmer, cobbler’s tubers were a deeply important food that reminded him of his late master. “When the emperor left on his long journey, and returned with his lucky find, I never thought things would turn out as they did.”

When the Empire was still young, the emperor had once left the city on his own and come back with a mysterious crop in hand. That was the cobbler’s tuber. They were strange vegetables covered in dirt, and Wilhelm had carried them in an unusual transparent bag. After boiling and eating a tuber, the emperor had ordered his palace mages to grow them.

Elmer would never forget that happening. He’d still been an admiral at the time.

They’d gone on to plant the crop in all sorts of places, to ascertain where it could grow. Sunny areas, dark areas, locations with and without water, healthy soil, and arid soil. They’d found that cobbler’s tubers could grow in not one, but all of those areas. They were an incredibly sturdy crop, surprising even the emperor himself.

Under the emperor’s orders, the Empire began to grow the crop. Soon after, it became an extremely important food source that helped keep the emperor’s subjects well fed. The cobbler’s tubers covered the expansive, arid lands of the Empire in green.

Elmer had watched all of that happen in real time. The various meals made of cobbler’s tubers ended up being important memories to him—just as important as his many recollections of going into battle with the emperor, back when Wilhelm was still young and beautiful, resembling his mother in so many ways.

“Indeed,” said Alphonse. “Even in the Duchy, we’ve heard about how incredible cobbler’s tubers are.”

To Alphonse, meanwhile, cobbler's tubers were a completely necessary element of his beloved curry rice. After returning from the island, he'd quickly learned that they were the Empire's ace in the hole.

It didn't take much for soil to grow sterile, since the things that grew in the land devoured lots of nutrients. In a place like the Empire, where plentiful arid wastelands were incapable of fostering wheat or other crops, being able to grow cobbler's tubers anywhere seemed like a godsend.

Elmer and Alphonse continued to chat, their food eventually arriving.

"Sorry for the wait!" said Aletta. "Here's your large curry rice and croquette lunch special. Today's croquette lunch includes a triangular curry croquette, a square beef stew croquette, and a round plain potato croquette. Um, on the potato croquette, I recommend only using the black sauce in that blue bottle."

A dish of white stuff topped with brown stuff sat in front of Alphonse. In front of Elmer, however, was the croquette plate he'd ordered.

Ho! This is quite extravagant. But are these really croquettes?

Elmer looked down at the still-hot otherworldly croquettes and tilted his head slightly. Off to the side was a bowl of yellow soup and some soft-looking bread. Bright green veggies and some small-but-colorful fruit sat on the main plate.

And then there were the three main pieces of food. Those had to be the croquettes, but they looked altogether different from the fried imperial croquettes covered in dry flour that Elmer was familiar with. Nonetheless, they looked delicious.

I suppose I'll dig in.

Before he could do that, however, Elmer noticed the aroma of something fried in fresh oil making its way to his nose. The croquettes' light sizzling was enough to get his mouth watering, so he picked up a fork and knife and began to eat.

First, he stabbed his knife into the beef stew croquette, feeling the blade pierce the crunchy crust with incredible ease. The inside of the croquette was brown, with orange karoot specks and bits of meat peppering the cobbler's tuber. Elmer even spotted big mushroom pieces.

He cut a large slice off the croquette and placed it in his mouth. *Oh, my. This is delightful.*

The croquette he bit into had the same delightful texture he'd sensed when his knife first cut the dish. Beneath the crunchy crust was the familiar, crumbly cobbler's tuber.

Much to Elmer's surprise, however, the croquette had a unique flavor. He'd been alive for many years at that point, but he'd never tasted anything like this before. The flavor was salty but slightly sweet as well. The barely boiled oranie's sweet taste mixed with the meat juices and thinly cut karoots, creating an unfamiliar sweetness that the black mushrooms absorbed.

Munching on the sweet croquette, Elmer reached for some vegetables. The leafy, bright green veggies fell apart in his mouth with each satisfying crunch, and their refreshing flavor served as the perfect way to reset his palate for the next bite of croquette.

The other croquettes must be delicious, too.

Elmer was deeply satisfied by the light crust's mouthfeel and the first croquette's soft-but-flavorful insides. After cleansing his palate with some vegetables, he reached for the triangular curry croquette.

As he did before, he cut into the croquette and took a bite. *Oh, my. This is... somewhat spicy.*

Indeed it was. Elmer could tell that the man in the kitchen had seasoned the croquette with all kinds of spices, creating a hot, complex flavor. In terms of ingredients, the curry croquette seemed to be made up of some sort of green bean, pieces of meat, and oranie. Or, at least, those were what Elmer saw upon looking at the croquette's yellow insides, made of cobbler's tuber covered in some kind of brown stuff.

I didn't think valuable spices could be used like this.

The Empire only had one port to speak of, so the large nation's spices were quite a bit more expensive than its neighbors'. There were few nobles in the Empire, as well, so the country itself valued simplicity and enjoying things in moderation. Something like a croquette made with all these spices was simply

underheard of.

But this really is delicious.

The croquette wasn't a case of someone absentmindedly using a bunch of spices with no plan. It was spicy enough to make Elmer crave water, yes, but not enough to choke him up. It was aromatic and made him want to eat even more.

Elmer reached for the soft brown bread off to the side. In his mouth, its gentle, sweet flavor mixed with the croquette's lingering spiciness, forming a beautiful combination.

Now then, last but not least...

Having finished off two croquettes, Elmer grabbed the remaining one, which was oblong. This was supposedly the plain potato croquette, the one closest to what Elmer was familiar with in the Empire.

Mmm...yeah.

As soon as Elmer took a bite, a smile formed on his face. The two flavored ones had been delicious, but when it came to croquettes, simple really was best.

The mashed cobbler's tubers, oranie, and meat inside, the light salt-and-pepper seasoning—this was the plainest of croquettes. Yet, despite that simplicity, nothing could beat a steaming-hot croquette fried in fresh oil.

Let's see... I believe she said the blue bottle.

After taking a single bite, Elmer grabbed the bottle the waitress had mentioned earlier. In the Empire, it was customary to put a dash of vinegar on one's croquette. Too much ruined the whole thing, but just a little was enough to bring out the flavor perfectly.

Whoa—it's black!

Elmer splashed the black vinegar onto the croquette. He tilted his head, somewhat surprised at how different the sauce was from what he'd expected. Some got onto his fork, so he gave it a lick.

Wow! This is something else.

Elmer's eyebrows lifted in surprise at the black liquid's deep flavor. It wasn't just vinegar; in addition to its sourness, numerous other ingredients created a complex overall taste. That paired well with the croquette's simplicity, producing a different foodstuff altogether.

I see. Now I understand why Emperor Wilhelm fell in love with croquettes.

Elmer thought back on something Emperor Wilhelm had once said to him.

When Wolfgang had his first child, Princess Adelheid, Wilhelm had decided to step down. He'd built a palace outside the city so that he could spend the rest of his days there.

He'd supposedly built the palace in the middle of nowhere so that, when his son ruled the Empire, Wilhelm would be too far away to be called back to handle politics.

According to Wilhelm, however, that wasn't all. *"Over there is something that we, as a nation, will never get our hands on—regardless of our might. One day, when you're no longer an admiral...when you're just Elmer...I'll take you there myself."*

Elmer had never really understood what Wilhelm meant, and the emperor had unfortunately passed away before he could fulfill that promise.

Now, however, Elmer finally got it. Here was this Restaurant to Another World, with dishes similar to the Empire's. That was no coincidence. It didn't take Elmer long to realize that his hunch was indeed fact.

Just then, the restaurant bells rang out, welcoming a beautiful young woman who looked much like Elmer's first love and even had her name.

After leaving the restaurant, Elmer and Alphonse spoke of a great many things—things that had happened in the past and things that would happen in the future.

"Oh? You plan on crossing the continent?"

"Yes." Elmer explained his decision. "As an admiral of the Empire, I've seen much of the Eastern Continent. Now, I'd quite like to explore the west."

He wanted to watch over the young princess of a certain country. She would

one day be married off to a prince from another land, so he would keep an eye on her in Wilhelm's stead.

But Elmer didn't dare say that out loud.

Chapter 87: Chinese Congee

The Restaurant to Another World closed up at nine in the evening, after all its customers had gone home.

“I shall return again.” The last regular left with a giant silver pot in hand; she made it look light.

Farewell.

“Thank you so much!”

Kuro and Aletta saw her off. The restaurant’s atmosphere immediately felt more relaxed.

“Well done, ladies. Good work today.” The master complimented the young women.

They responded in kind. “Thank you, Master!”

You too.

Some time had passed since Kuro had begun working at Nekoya, and it seemed as though she and Aletta had finally broken the ice.

“All that’s left is to eat, clean up, and head on home!”

I can’t wait for the curry.

As the trio chatted with natural smiles, the door’s bells began to ring, signaling a late customer’s arrival.

The road connecting the Kingdom’s capital with its port town was incredibly important to the nation’s commerce.

Countless merchants with goods in tow, knights on beautiful horses, and adventurers and mercenaries they’d hired as bodyguards crossed paths on that lane in a single day.

All kinds of inns, bars, and places for adult entertainment lined the main route, making it bustle. Ulrich, a former mercenary, lived in a town along that road.

About three years ago, he'd fallen in love with a girl he met in town. He'd decided to retire, using his skills and experience as a former mercenary to work as a town guard instead. Although the pay wasn't great, he rested easy knowing that his life was in no danger. Thugs and hoodlums were all he had to deal with, which let him lead a peaceful life.

As a town guard, however, he often got wrapped up in the area's nonsense.

Ulrich couldn't help but frown, repeating the man's request back. "You want me to look for a restaurant?"

In front of Ulrich, the old man with the white beard—Soujun—nodded in response. "Yessir."

Three days ago, after drinking at a friend's house, the old man had staggered into some restaurant on his way home.

According to Soujun, the restaurant served a certain dish he'd wanted to eat for years but couldn't. He wanted to go back. There was a problem, however.

"I drank so much that day, and, well..." Soujun looked at Ulrich.

It didn't take Ulrich much to figure out what the old man wanted to say. "You must've blacked out after eating your fill. When you came to, you were home already. That's why you can't remember anything about the restaurant, right?"

"Precisely! I remember eating some delicious porridge, but that's about it."

Soujun had drunk so much that his memories were a total wash. He had no clue what restaurant he'd gone to that day.

Worse, his kids had already grown up and gone off on their own. When his wife had passed away some years ago, Soujun had used the opportunity to move, so now he lived alone. That meant nobody knew what restaurant he'd visited that night.

"Look, old man, have you considered just dropping by all the restaurants in

town? It's that simple. Why do you need my help?"

As far as Ulrich was concerned, as long as the restaurant Soujun had visited was in town, all the man had to do was ask around a bit.

Soujun seemed to disagree. "I'm not sure that'd do much. That night, I drank till late. If it wasn't for the moonlight, I probably wouldn't have gotten home."

"I get it." Ulrich immediately caught on to what Soujun was implying. "No restaurant around here is open that late, as far as I know."

The town was full of places for tomfoolery, but the only joints open that late were in the red-light district. Once night fell, restaurants closed up shop. Bars served small meals until fairly late, but that was about it.

"I barely remember that evening, but I do remember the restaurant being bright as day! Even though it was the middle of the night, you see."

Despite his scrambled memory, Soujun recalled the restaurant being so bright that he'd seen the wood table's grain. The old man figured there was no way folks wouldn't know about a place that stood out that much.

Ulrich had been a town guard for some time, but he'd never heard of a restaurant like that. "Hmm. I got the gist, but I'm sorry, old man. I don't think I'm gonna be much help."

He sighed. *The old man must've drunk himself into a tizzy and dreamed it all up.*

Soujun himself almost seemed to have the same thought. "Curses. I was hoping a town guard might know something."

He let out a sigh but didn't seem all that disappointed. He'd probably seen Ulrich's response coming.

"Well, if I hear something, I'll let you know. Anyhow, I gotta get back to work. Take care," Ulrich replied, feeling kind of bad for the older gentleman.

"You have my gratitude, youngster," Soujun smiled, perhaps happy to hear the young man's considerate words.

The two parted ways. Little did either know that Ulrich's promise would bear fruit sooner than they expected.

A few days later, while doing his rounds in town, Ulrich caught a thief. The halfling man called himself Tedd and dressed like an adventurer.

As fate had it, he was attempting to sneak into the house of the old man Ulrich had dealt with a few days earlier.

The halfling's excuses after Ulrich caught him were nothing if not pathetic. "No, I swear I wasn't trying to steal anything! I just wanted to drop by, is all!"

"That doesn't explain why you tried to break in," Ulrich said. "An old man lives here. He doesn't have anything worth stealing."

Tedd took a moment to think and then apparently decided to explain his intentions. "Well, you see, a door appears in a closet of that there house. The house used to be empty, but a few years ago, an older gentleman moved in. Since he doesn't seem to know about the door, I figured I'd just go ahead and use it."

"A door? What the blue blazes are you talking about?"

The halfling's explanation puzzled Ulrich, but the town guard later heard the same story from Tedd's adventurer comrades. (Yes, he was actually an adventurer.)

That was how Ulrich learned of the restaurant that Soujun had found himself in on that fateful night.

Soujun, Ulrich, and Tedd headed to the barely used closet and quickly found the door, a cat plaque on its front. They turned the knob and, as the door opened, were met by the sound of bells ringing.

Although the three men were in a small, dark room, the space beyond the door was bright as day. It really was a restaurant. In exchange for guiding Soujun and Ulrich there, Tedd was pardoned for his crimes and avoided getting locked in a jail cell.

"Right! I'm gonna eat over there," he told the guard and the old man. "Oh, and keep this a secret, aye?"

Seemingly familiar with the restaurant, Tedd quickly found an empty table and began to give his order to the blonde-haired waitress nearby.

Soon after taking Tedd's order, the waitress noticed Soujun. "Welcome! Wait...huh? Aren't you the older gentleman from the other day?" She raised her voice in surprise.

The waitress remembered Soujun all too well. The other evening, just when the restaurant had closed, he'd wandered in drunkenly, partaken in the staff meal the master had made, and then gone home full and satisfied.

Soujun looked at the young waitress. Judging by her features, she was clearly from the Western Continent. A wave of nostalgia washed over him.

"Oooh! So, this was the place! No wonder I couldn't find it!"

He finally remembered exactly what had happened that day.

Soujun had gone to drink with an old friend who'd been a sailor on the same ship as him, back when they were both younger. After finding out that his friend was retiring, he'd dropped by to say hello. The pair wound up indulging in the goodbye gift Soujun's friend had received upon leaving the ship: a bottle of booze made of rice from the Western Continent. It was extremely rare, so the two had drunk well into the night.

Eventually, Soujun had wandered home, stumbling into the restaurant when only its master and waitresses were there. Of course, he'd thought he was asleep, so he'd ended up making a rather ridiculous order. Hungry after drinking all night, he'd requested a large meal, specifically one from the Eastern Continent that included rice.

"I know this order's unreasonable, but could I get the same thing I had the other day?" Soujun asked the demon waitress.

"Um...hold on one second. It was just the staff meal, and it takes quite a while to make. I'll go ask the master," replied the girl.

She went to the kitchen and soon returned with an answer. "Um...it'll take an hour. Er, I believe that's half a moment by the old timescale. Is that all right with you?"

Soujun nodded. “Of course. I’ll happily wait.”

He didn’t quite understand how long the dish would take. However, he did know that the food would come if he waited. He was an old man with free time anyway; a little waiting wouldn’t kill him.

“There you have it, Sir Guard. I’m going to wait. But what will you do?”

“Since I’m here already, I suppose I’ll join you. I’ll just grab something to drink and wait, too,” replied Ulrich.

The halfling had tickled Ulrich’s curiosity. He wanted to see just what the restaurant’s delicious food and drink were all about.

“Understood. Let me take you to an empty table,” said the waitress. “Um, sir? We have a menu with all our selections and descriptions of each of them. Can you read?”

“Indeed I can. Bring one, please. Oh, and do you have any ale?”

“We don’t have ale, but we have something similar called beer.”

“Beer it is, then. Oh, and bring some sausages or something!”

Ulrich and Soujun arrived at their table, wiped their hands using the moist warm cloths the waitress gave them, and quenched their thirst with the slightly fruity ice water.

It wasn’t long before the waitress returned with drinks in hand. Ulrich immediately sipped from the glass mug of yellow liquid topped with pure-white bubbles.

“Hoh! Now, this is some good drink! Little lady, could I get another? Something that pairs well with this stuff to munch on!” Ulrich dug into the brownish snacks the waitress had brought.

Watching his companion chug and eat away, Soujun gulped. *Urgh! Patience. Patience...*

Soujun was quite a drinker, so truth be told, he wanted to indulge his cravings immediately. However, he’d already decided that he wouldn’t drink today.

I can’t afford to sully my tongue with alcohol before I eat that porridge. I’ve

got to at least wait till after.

Since he'd been so drunk during his previous visit, Soujun barely remembered what the porridge tasted like. All he knew was that it had a delicious, nostalgic flavor. That's why, today, he was going to partake in the stuff without a drop of alcohol in his body.

Eventually, a man who looked to be the restaurant's master came out with the porridge in hand. "Sorry for the wait, sir. Here's your Chinese congee."

The master placed a wooden trivet on the table and then set a small, thick clay pot atop that. He put thinly sliced, golden-brown bread and pickled vegetables nearby.

"The pot's very hot right now, so try not to touch it with your bare hands," said the master. "Put its contents into this bowl here when you eat, okay? Feel free to eat the pickles and toast however you like. Enjoy!"

The moment the master removed the pot's lid with a moist towel, the gentle-but-sweet fragrance inside made Soujun gulp.

This is it. This is the scent!

The smell of hot, fresh rice was altogether different from any fruit. Soujun recalled inhaling the congee's aroma and feeling as though he'd immediately sobered up the last time he'd come to the restaurant.

"That soup looks pretty damn good," Ulrich said.

"I'm not sharing! I waited for this!"

Despite having eaten and drunk his fair share already, Ulrich looked jealousy at Soujun's meal. The old man simply ignored him.

With the large white spoon next to the pot, Soujun poured some porridge into his bowl. As he filled it, he saw lots of chicken meat and round, pink shripe floating within.

He scooped some hot porridge up with his spoon, blew on it to cool it down, and put it into his mouth.

Mm...mmm! As the porridge's flavors exploded, Soujun couldn't help nodding his head.

The savory tastes of the shripe and chicken melded with the porridge's salty seasoning. The rice had absorbed oil and broth, but maintained a sweetness. The tender chicken and delicate shripe's unique textures gave the porridge a mouthfeel all its own.

The other day, all Soujun had remembered was that the porridge was delicious. Now, however, he'd be able to recall each and every delicious flavor there was to experience in the dish.

But I'm not done yet.

After indulging in the porridge for a while, Soujun reached for the pickles. They were tremendously crunchy and a dash sour and salty. Their unique flavor reminded him of his hometown's fish sauce.

Their flavor was slightly too strong by itself, but when mixed with the porridge, the pickles melded well with its gentle taste. In a word, they were delicious.

Soujun dropped the small pieces of fried bread into the porridge and took another bite.

The bread had obtained a lightness from oil-frying that allowed it to slowly absorb the meal's juices. It was a satisfying, if rich, treat by itself. Eating it after it soaked up the broth, however, meant that the bread's oils mixed with the broth itself, creating a brand-new, amazing taste.

It wasn't long before the once-full bowl of porridge was empty, leaving Soujun with only the feeling of satisfaction.

"Whew!" he sighed. Next time, he'd have booze on the side while he ate. Now, however, he'd indulge his thirst.

"Excuse me, could I also get something to drink?" he asked the waitress. "I'll try the beer my companion has."

Chapter 88:

Chili Chicken

If you ever find your way to this area's biggest tree on a Day of Satur, you should check it out. The food there is incredible.

The traveling bard Alzas had once met a fellow bard in a massive city, and the two had traveled together for a time.

The bard in question was a young halfling woman on the road all by her lonesome. She played her tiny harp as Alzas sang his songs, her young-but-pretty voice occasionally harmonizing with his.

Since their performances always drew passersby who flipped them some coins, they agreed to travel together, on the condition that they split their earnings.

After the bards walked the same path for half a year, Alzas decided to stay in town until spring, since the cold months were dangerous as soon as winter rolled in. The young woman opted to continue her journey.

Grateful for their time together, she'd taught Alzas something when the two finally parted ways. She'd told him about the Restaurant to Another World, a mysterious place that only opened on the Day of Satur. Alzas had recalled her words only minutes earlier.

A pained grin crossed Alzas's face as he dragged his injured leg along the ground. If he was going to survive, his only hope was to make for the restaurant. All he could do was laugh at how hopeless his current situation was.

I can't believe I'm actually depending on that nonsense.

Bards lived lives of freedom, traveling alone. That meant the shadow of death always accompanied them while they journeyed across the land. Without the bodyguards whom merchants hired and traveled with, or an adventurer's teammates, any injury or encounter with a monster could mean certain death. That said, bards couldn't afford to just stick around towns and wait for a lucky

encounter with a departing merchant or adventurer, either.

Bards' songs were their lifeline. As soon as a song's newness wore out, the amount of coin it made decreased noticeably. That said, an experienced bard like Alzas could play and sing numerous songs, so he kept himself afloat without too much difficulty.

One day, Alzas had set out on his journey and found himself caught in a rockslide, injured. It was a bit of crazy luck that he wasn't crushed and killed on the spot, but one large chunk of stone had smashed into his leg. That was as close to a worst-case scenario as one could experience.

Each step Alzas took was pained, but it wasn't that he couldn't walk. If he got to a town of some kind and rested for a month, he could heal up. The problem was that his walking speed was about as slow as a baby crawling on all fours. He would run out of food and water before arriving at any kind of settlement.

That meant he was going to die on the roadside.

In this incredibly dire situation, Alzas remembered his old traveling companion's words. The last time he'd passed the tree in question, it unfortunately hadn't been the Day of Satur, so he'd simply made his way to the next town.

This time, though, the large tree was just close enough that he'd make it there on his injured leg.

If nothing else, I can at least rest by the tree. I won't be moving much until this pain subsides at least a little.

His expectations low, and his trusted instrument digging into his shoulders, Alzas very, very slowly continued to walk.

Eventually, the bard reached the tree, finding a hole just large enough for a single adult. Even luckier for Alzas, previous travelers who'd used the space—likely small halflings who'd dropped by—had stuffed it full of soft weeds and such, even building a small rock furnace. It was a simple little camping spot.

Perfect. I can at least get some rest.

Alzas would be safe from the rain and wind, and could try and tend to his

wound a bit. As soon as he entered the hole, however, his eyes widened.

“What is this? Wait—could this be the door that Marina spoke of?”

A well-kept oak door stood before him. There was a cat plaque on its smooth surface. It was undoubtedly the very same door to the Restaurant to Another World that his halfling bard companion had told him of so many moons ago.

“Fine.”

After thinking for a moment, Alzas made his decision and put his hand on the doorknob. As luck had it, today was the Day of Satur, so he had no choice but to go.

He turned the knob.

As Alzas set foot in a completely different world, the sound of bells ringing lightly filled the air. The room beyond the door was windowless and so brightly lit that he couldn't tell what time of day it was.

A strange room stretched out before him. Alzas had crossed much of the continent, yet he spotted monsters like lamia and ogres in clothes he didn't recognize. They sat peacefully at tables, and in front of them were all sorts of dishes full of different foods and drinks.

Since hurting his leg, all Alzas had eaten was dried meat. He was starving.

“Um, are you okay? You seem to be injured,” a blonde demon girl called out to him. She wore what looked to be a uniform of sorts, so she was likely a waitress.

Completely caught up in the restaurant's mysterious atmosphere, Alzas looked the same as he had back when he was just a country bumpkin who'd left home for the big city for the first time.

“Yes, I actually hurt my leg quite badly. If possible, I'd like to rest here for a moment. Um, could I get a glass of water and your cheapest meal? Thank you,” said Alzas to the young lady.

In his current situation, it seemed silly to give much thought to the state of his wallet. Still, he felt that it was better to conserve his money as much as possible.

“Absolutely. Let me take you to a table.” The waitress immediately led him to the seat closest to the entrance.

“Please hold on for a minute—oh, actually, sir, do you like spicy food?” the waitress asked Alzas after ensuring that he was seated.

“Spicy food? Well, sure. I don’t mind it.” Alzas nodded, imagining what kind of dish might come out. He’d eaten a few heavily spiced high-class meals in port towns.

“All right! I’ll be back shortly,” said the waitress, turning around and heading for the kitchen.

Now that Alzas was seated and somewhat relieved, the pain in his leg came flooding back. “Ow...ow...! Crap. I managed to walk on it, so it’s not broken, but...”

He pulled up his pant leg to check the wound. “Yikes. It’s completely swollen.”

The area that the rock had hit had turned purple. No wonder it hurt to walk on it.

Alzas sighed loudly. “And I don’t have any tonics on me, either.”

In Alzas’s experience, the wound would swell further if he left it, making walking even more difficult than it already was. Even if he rested here, as soon as he left the restaurant, all that waited for him on the side of the road was death.

Just as he thought of asking whether he could stay for a few days, someone suddenly spoke to Alzas.

“What an awful injury. But don’t worry. Everything’s going to be just fine.”

When Alzas raised his head to look at the person, he was shocked. “A high priestess of the Lord of Light?!”

The young woman with golden-blond hair was positively stunning. Resting on the robes across her ample chest was a gold sigil.

Sigils showed a priest or priestess’s rank within the church, based on their abilities and skills. They were made by artisans who served the shrine and were gold, silver, or copper. Having a sigil around one’s neck without a shrine’s

permission was a grave sin and felony.

The fact that the woman in front of Alzas wore hers so proudly proved in and of itself that she was a true high priestess.

Now that Alzas was aware of the priestess, he realized that three women with silver sigils around their necks sat at another table. They wore surprised expressions as they gazed over at him. It was more than likely that this priestess was their boss.

Caring not a bit for their watchful eyes, the woman knelt. “Please, excuse me for but a moment.”

She placed her cool hands on Alzas’s swollen leg. “Great light that rules over the heavens, please grant your mercy to this man. Heal his wounds and give him the power to live through tomorrow.”

As she spoke, bright light coursed through Alzas’s leg, relieving his pain. It touched him for but a few moments, but it was more than enough to completely heal his wound.

“There. You’ll be fine now, sir.”

“Th-thank you so much,” Alzas responded, almost in a whisper.

This wasn’t the first time that Alzas had encountered a follower of the Lord of Light. At various towns during his time on the road, he’d had priests, priestesses, and servants of the Light heal minor wounds or give him tonics for healing. But he’d never been healed at this speed nor directly by a high priest or priestess.

“You’re quite welcome. Please be careful on your journey, sir.”

One normally had to offer at least a gold coin to be healed by high-ranking shrine clergy. However, this woman asked for nothing and simply smiled at Alzas before returning to her table.

The blonde waitress soon came back with water and a box with some sort of green cross on it. “Sorry for the wait! I brought you a glass of water, and, um, a first aid box—huh?”

She gave Alzas a puzzled look. He’d appeared to be in so much pain earlier,

but now he looked fine.

“Oh. Um, a kind high priestess healed me,” he said to the confused young waitress.

“H-healed you? O-oh, is that so?” The girl smiled nervously, setting down a pitcher and a transparent glass full of ice water.

“Your food will be out shortly,” she added before leaving for the kitchen.

“Phew.”

Alzas had just been walking the line between life and death, and yet now he found himself safe, sound, and healed. As relief washed over him, he let out a massive sigh and turned his attention to his water.

I only asked for a single cup.

The pitcher full of water and ice made Alzas nervous. What if they charged him for it against his will?

No, they won't. Marina would never recommend a place like that.

Alzas shook off his concerns, picked up the cold glass, and took a sip. As the water cooled his tired body, he immediately noticed its refreshing aroma.

This is good. Given how much he'd sweated from pain, the water tasted extra delicious.

Now that he was actually drinking the water, Alzas was rather grateful that the waitress had brought an entire pitcher. As soon as he emptied his cup, he filled it again. By the time he'd quenched his thirst, the pitcher was half empty.

Now that his pain and thirst were both gone, his hunger began to take over.

“I'm starving.” Alzas gently rubbed his stomach.

I've brought today's special.

Almost as if she'd aimed for this timing, a different waitress—an elf girl with black hair—appeared with his food in hand.

There are free seconds and refills on the bread, soup, and water.

As she spoke those incredibly welcome words, she gently put his food down

in front of him.

The special is chili chicken. It's chicken meat fried in oil, but it's a little spicy, the waitress explained with a blank expression.

Alzas gulped as he saw the sizzling food in front of him.

Take your time and enjoy, said the elf girl before disappearing, leaving the bard to his meal.

He picked up his fork and looked down at the chili chicken. The light brown fried chicken was cut into big pieces topped with bright red sauce. The aroma coming off it reminded him of chili pepel.

Hrm. This does look rather spicy.

In fact, the chili chicken reminded Alzas of soup he'd eaten at a port town he'd stopped by recently. It was made of chopped fish and vegetables boiled together, with fresh chopped chili pepel from the Western Continent added to spice it up.

That soup had a uniquely delicious taste, but it was incredibly spicy. Alzas recalled how he hadn't been able to sing for the entire day.

Hmm...what to do, what to do.

It would be rude not to try the chili chicken. Alzas made up his mind, grabbed the beautiful knife off the table, cut a small piece of chicken, and took a bite.

"Oooh, this is...!" He couldn't help but speak aloud.

The red sauce was indeed spicy, but it wasn't *too* spicy. In fact, it was slightly sweet and even tasted vaguely savory. The sauce made Alzas hungry for more, if anything. It drew out the fried chicken's true potential.

The white meat fell apart with each bite, revealing the soft chicken below the aromatic skin's surface. Any pieces that still had skin attached were full of juices that rushed into Alzas's mouth as he chewed. There, those juices combined with the red spicy sauce, forming a delicious combination of flavors.

I see why Marina gave this place such high praise.

After devouring about half the chili chicken and a number of crunchy, fresh

vegetables, Alzas turned his attention to the bread and soup. He felt that it'd be a waste if the meal were over so soon.

He wiped his hands clean with the warm, moist cloth—had it been run through hot water?—then grabbed the bread. Feeling its warmth in his palm, he took a bite and tasted the loaf's soft, sweet, freshly baked flavor.

This won't fill me up, but it's delicious.

The brown soup's taste vaguely reminded Alzas of fish sauce. Floating on the broth's surface were bits of a crunchy white vegetable and some soft-looking yellow stuff.

Wait, is that egg?

After chewing the vegetables and eating the mysterious yellow ingredient, Alzas figured out that the cook had actually put some kind of egg into the hot soup. The egg, too, was incredibly soft, making its way down his throat quickly.

Now, time to go back to the chicken.

After doing the flavor rounds, Alzas took a bite of the slightly lukewarm chili chicken and noticed that it tasted different. *Hm...?*

As he'd eaten the other courses, the sauce atop the chicken had soaked into its breading. In exchange for its crunchiness, the meat had gained a perfect tenderness. Each bite of chicken mixed its oil and juices with the sauce, giving the dish a whole new flavor.

I see now. This is also captivating.

Both the crunchy and tender textures were appealing in their own right. Alzas put his fork down, thoroughly satisfied with his plate of chili chicken.

So, this is what Marina meant when she said that there was a restaurant that served nothing but delicious food.

Alzas thought about how strange fate could be. Before coming to the restaurant, he'd been on the verge of death. Now he was not only fully healed but also deeply satisfied.

You know, this might just make for a great song.

With that thought on his mind, Alzas quietly rested.

Chapter 89:

Green Tea Shaved Ice

Far above the clouds in the sky was a small floating island.

There, Ilzegan yawned. “Haaah...I’m bored.”

In front of him stretched an endless blue sky, and below him, endless white clouds. He also saw the perfectly kept paradise that the golems maintained. He was tired of looking at that as well.

Ilzegan had everything he needed here. On this island where he lived, he had all the fruit he could eat, and the golems provided anything he might require in his day-to-day life. It was neither hot nor cold, and not a single creature could threaten his life on this floating island.

The island itself, and the extensive knowledge passed down by his parents, had been Ilzegan’s entire world for the past two hundred and fifty years.

In many ways, the island was the inheritance his parents had left him. Living alone there, Ilzegan had but one problem—there was nothing to do, and he was dreadfully bored.

“I’m really tired of all this research stuff, too.”

As his parents lay on their deathbed, they’d requested that he continue the research they’d spent thousands of years working on. After their passing, Ilzegan had followed his own curiosity and continued their work but eventually realized that he couldn’t find a purpose or reason to do so. Now, he just did nothing.

According to Ilzegan’s parents, who’d passed away some two hundred years ago, he was an elf. That particular race was said to have once ruled over the world itself with their natural magical powers.

However, only a hundred years after Ilzegan’s parents were born, a great plague had begun. Thus, the elves eventually withdrew into the shadows. The plague had lasted long enough to nearly wipe out the world’s great, wise rulers.

In just twenty years, over half the elves had died.

That had been the end of the elves. Many mages who'd performed incredible magic no other race could hope to mimic had died from the awful plague, which had led to the loss of all kinds of magic passed down orally.

Numerous dark beings in the world had looked upon the elves' prosperity with ill intent: those who worshiped dragons as gods, monsters who worshiped *it*, and even demi-humans with weak magic and short lives. They'd all begun to hunt the elves down, one by one.

Faced with the plague and the dark beings seeking to take their lives, some elves had taken drastic measures. There were those who sought to use magic to change themselves into wraiths, maintaining their intelligence and consciousness. Some even prayed to the God of Chaos, Ruler Over All Life—the very being so detested by those who prayed to the dragon gods. According to history, those people eventually fell to the darkness, becoming creatures that could no longer be called elves.

According to Ilzegan's parents, the only elves who'd survived those dark days were the ones who threw away culture and fled into the woods, living out their lives like a bunch of backwater heathens. The elves with any kind of dignity or social standing were all dead.

"Well, I guess I have my folks to thank for fleeing into the sky. I am alive and all, I suppose."

Ilzegan's parents had always told him that he was a cultured elf. He was the son of two elves who'd used their great wisdom and education to escape the evil on the surface, building their own research facility and raising it into the sky. They'd survived by cutting themselves off from the outside world.

On this island of paradise, they'd continued their research. But one day, they'd realized something. Over a thousand years had passed since their births, and death loomed in the shadows.

Although they feared the end, they also knew that if they used magic to overcome their deaths, they'd keep living only as horrific creatures with no elven knowledge to speak of.

With no escape left to them, and no time to research a solution, they picked the most primitive way to pass their legacy on. In other words, they gave birth to Ilzegan and entrusted their knowledge to him.

“What should I do today?”

Ilzegan knew more than enough. He simply didn’t have his parents’ passion for research, so he spent his days not doing much at all. In some ways, he was scared that he would pass the next seven hundred years of his life like that. But for now, he’d focus on how to spend the day.

“Huh? Something about the magical energies’ flow is...off,” Ilzegan whispered to himself.

His ears twitched. He knew everything there was to know about this island he’d been born on. In the last two hundred years, he’d adjusted nearly every single golem his parents had left behind for him with his own hands. He understood how everything worked—or at least, he thought he did.

Right now, however, he felt a magical energy that was not his own on the island. The magic’s flow was unstable, and Ilzegan theorized that it would likely disappear by the next day.

“Well, whatever. It’ll make a good pastime.”

Deciding to make his way toward it, he connected his consciousness directly to a golem working nearby. “Golem, carry me to my destination,” he ordered.

Just like that, the large machine gently lifted the elf and took him to his chosen spot. The new magical energy was underground, in the place where the island’s magical power was strongest, just above the device that kept the island afloat. That was also where Ilzegan’s parents were buried.

Something was up.

“Huh.” In front of Ilzegan stood a door, as though it had always been there. Ilzegan immediately deduced what it was for. “Some sort of teleportation magic? And it connects to another world?”

His eyes sparkled excitedly. This would be a perfect time killer. “I suppose I’ll take a look!”

The door might've been dangerous, but that thought didn't once cross the elf's mind. Instead, all Ilzegan could think about was how something had appeared to shake up his boring life. He placed his hand on the cool brass doorknob and turned it, opening the door.

The sound of bells filled the air. Guided by his curiosity, Ilzegan stepped happily through the doorway.

"Oho! I've never seen a place like this before!"

It was still early morning, and there were no windows to let in natural light. Ilzegan brightened the dark room with his magic and looked around the space with great curiosity.

There were plenty of tables and chairs, and some sort of mysterious magical device on the ceiling. What was it? Ilzegan couldn't sense any magic from it.

On each table were several bottles full of unknown substances. Ilzegan could just make out a light in the back of the room. Someone was here.

Still guided by his curiosity, Ilzegan proceeded deeper in.

The other person in the room seemed to have caught on to Ilzegan's presence and came out to meet the elf.

"Huh? Who might you be? Your ears are short, and you don't seem to have much magical power," Ilzegan spoke his first impressions aloud to the man who'd appeared before him. "You are rather hairy, though."

The man was bipedal but lacked wings or horns. Clearly, he was some sort of elf, but he looked quite different from Ilzegan's parents.

"Er, I run this restaurant. Are you a customer?" the master asked the stranger. It was so early that even Aletta hadn't arrived yet.

Judging by the unknown man's long ears, the master surmised that he was an elf.

"This is a restaurant? Let me think," said Ilzegan. "That's one of those places where you trade coin for goods of equal value, yes?"

It immediately became clear to the master that this elf knew little of how the world operated. *That's right. Supposedly, there are elves out there who've never*

seen money.

In fact, the master already knew an elf just like that, and she worked at the restaurant to boot.

He shrugged in resignation. “Well, yeah. ’Cept we serve drinks and cook meals for coin here.”

“Oh—cook meals, you say?”

Ilzegan was intrigued. He had some knowledge of “cooking” meals. That was the process of taking food that one couldn’t eat as it was and boiling or roasting it. None of the fruit on his island required that process, but Ilzegan knew of its existence.

His mother and father had felt that any sort of food was fine, as long as they obtained the necessary nutrients to live, so they hadn’t made their own meals.

“In that case, make me a cooked meal! Something rare!”

“Rare, huh? I’m actually still kinda setting up shop. Mind if it’s something light? Like a dessert, maybe?”

“Do as you wish, but be quick about it,” Ilzegan replied.

He nodded, sitting himself down at an open table. Since he didn’t know what cooked food was like, what point was there in choosing something?

The master had dealt with otherworldly customers for over ten years, so Ilzegan’s rather snotty attitude was nothing new to him. “Hold on just a moment.”

He headed to the kitchen and began preparing something appropriate for summer. Some time passed.

“Hrm...that’s right. If I remember correctly, it takes a while to cook things.” As Ilzegan stared at the strange ceiling light—it didn’t use magic?—he heard bells ringing.

“Hmm?” He turned to see a young woman with golden-blond hair and black horns.

She was about to deliver her usual greeting but panicked as soon as she saw

that a customer was already present. “Good—er, uh, welcome!”

“Hoh! A descendent of those who worshiped the Chaos, Ruler Over All Life, eh? Another first!” Ilzegant paid no mind to the girl’s nervousness, instead voicing his observations directly.

“H-huh? Ruler over...er...Chaos? What?” The girl looked dumbfounded.

Apparently, as time passed on the surface, knowledge of the Chaos had all but vanished. It wasn’t as though Ilzegant knew everything about the Chaos, either, so he decided to play it off.

“Ah, don’t mind me. I’m just speaking nonsense.”

“Hey, good morning, Aletta! Wash up and get changed. Do you mind holding off on breakfast for a little while? We have a customer.”

“N-no, not at all!” the girl named Aletta told the master. She added to Ilzegant, “Um, please enjoy your time here!”

She quickly vanished into the kitchen.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your dessert,” said the master. He put down a glass cup of some kind.

“What might this be?” Ilzegant had never seen anything like it before.

“Well, it’s the perfect dessert for summertime. Shaved ice. Green tea shaved ice to be specific,” replied the bearded master, smiling. “Take your time and enjoy.”

With that, the master retreated.

“Hoh—so, this food’s cooked, then?” Ilzegant had already lost interest in the restaurant’s master. He turned his attention to the dish in front of him.

A mound of white stuff filled the glass cup. Dark green liquid poured atop dripped its way down the mound.

At its base were some sort of black grains, as well as a soft white ball different from the see-through white stuff that made up the mound. The beautiful arrangement almost resembled a model mountain.

Ilzegant poked his finger into the white stuff and found it quite cold.

“Hoh. Is this snow?” he guessed at its true nature.

It never snowed on Ilzegan’s island, but he’d learned from his parents how to summon a cold blast of sleet capable of freezing attackers. The stuff in front of Ilzegan resembled the snow from the time he’d tried that magic.

“But what’s this green fluid? It almost resembles herbal syrup.”

The dark green liquid atop the “snow” reminded Ilzegan of the syrup made of medicinal herbs found in the island’s center. Ilzegan recalled how much he hated drinking that stuff, which was intensely bitter, when he was sick.

“Will this really be any good?”

The dessert’s color put him off, but Ilzegan nonetheless took the silver medicine spoon and stabbed it into the mound. The white mound crunched, and he pulled some “snow” from the green, liquid-soaked center. Into his mouth it went.

It was bitter but also sweet. His mouth’s heat immediately melted the “snow,” spreading its flavor across his tongue. The green herbal syrup had a boiled bitterness but was also far more sugary than any fruit Ilzegan had ever eaten. A refreshing aroma spread through his mouth as well.

Sweet, sour, and aromatic—all three elements unified on his tongue, eventually flowing down his throat. After his first bite, Ilzegan widened his eyes, once again observing the dish before him.

“What is this...?”

Despite its intense bitterness, it was delicious. He took another spoonful—a bigger one this time—and quietly transported it to his mouth. Yet again, sweet and sour flavors danced upon Ilzegan’s tongue, and it felt delightful. He couldn’t stop shoveling snow into his mouth.

Ilzegan was much like his parents, in that he only thought of food as something that existed to keep him alive. He’d never felt this way about something edible before.

As he continued to eat, he was struck by a mysterious headache that made him grasp at his head. “Argh!”



It was as if something were directly piercing his brain. The pain went away after a few moments, luckily, but was nonetheless intense.

“Is that what happens when one eats too much?”

Thinking about that sort of thing had become one of Ilzegan’s habits. He shook off the pain and looked down at the black flecks at the snow mountain’s base.

“Hrm. Are these beans?”

He recalled seeing something like the black specks in the island’s herbal garden. One had to cook those to make them edible, so his parents had never tried eating them.

These particular beans had apparently been boiled, since they’d nearly dissolved. Ilzegan scooped up a few with his spoon and brought them to his mouth to examine them.

“They’re sweet.” The beans weren’t at all bitter. And unlike the snow’s texture, they were soft.

Next, Ilzegan took a bite of the round white object beside the beans. “And this...this barely has any flavor at all.”

The white ball was right next to the beans, so it tasted faintly of them, but it had no real sweetness to speak of. Although its texture was soft and uniquely elastic, that was it.

“What’s the point, then?”

Ilzegan thought for a moment before having an idea. He ate a bite of the beans, the round white object, and the melting snow all together.

“Oh, my...”

The taste confirmed that he’d taken the right approach. The fusion of the crunchy, slightly melted snow drenched in herbal syrup, the sweet beans, and the springy white sphere turned the dish into something else entirely.

The combination kept the recipe’s bitterness at bay, but expanded and refined its sweetness, resulting in a longer-lasting flavor. Meanwhile, the white

ball provided a wonderful texture for Ilzegan's teeth.

"So, this is what cooking is."

Ilzegan couldn't help being disappointed that his parents had shown no interest in such a fascinating thing. He continued his journey through the mountain of snow, regularly stopping to hold his head as it began to ache.

Ilzegan returned to his island before the sun was directly above it. Perhaps because the door had served its purpose, it immediately vanished once he got home.

"Whew..." He held his stomach as he thought of what would come next. "It appears as though this world and the other are quite different from what I was taught."

In that case, he had to research both. Having found his new pastime, Ilzegan looked below him at the white clouds in the blue sky and thought excitedly about his next move.

Chapter 90:

Deep-Fried Fish Cakes

Long, long ago, when the Kingdom and Empire were at war, a group of merchants founded a small town near one of the many battlefields. The town was based around a fortress near the border, where the merchants hoped to sell goods to soldiers.

The soldiers were often up until late in the evening so that they'd be ready to defend against the Empire's savage power at any time. It was an important job. Once their shifts were over, they gathered at pubs and bars that were open late to let loose a bit.

Weak lamps and torches lit the stoneless paths. Countless folks went to and fro, despite it being the middle of the night. They were going to get food, to drink, and to make merry. This town was that sort of place.

Thus, many soldiers at the fortress had fathered children in the town.

A large number of those children lived with their mothers, away from their fathers, who typically had their own rooms at the fortress for their work.

Most of the children cared little who their fathers were. They grew up and became soldiers at the fortress, dreamed of riches, and went to the capital as adventurers; or even became roadkill somewhere.

How could they be blamed? Many of their mothers were courtesans. It wasn't particularly rare to have instances where multiple men went to and fro, meaning that—in the worst-case scenarios—there was no way of knowing who a child's father was.

However, there were circumstances in which children had to live with their fathers, such as when their mother passed away and their father felt some measure of responsibility.

Reiner's father, a soldier at the fortress, was off duty on this particular day. He held Reiner's hand as they walked through the town.

“Dad, where are we going?” Reiner asked as he held his father’s hand tightly. He was a bit nervous.

Up until then, Reiner had lived with his mother. However, she’d passed away from an illness. With nowhere for Reiner to go, his father Paul had taken him in. Only a month had gone by since that had happened.

Reiner currently spent his days in the fortress. There, he was at least fed, although he still did chores despite being a child. In terms of living quarters, he stayed in a small room assigned to lower-rung guards. In fact, that was why Reiner was so happy to walk through the town outside, although he was already familiar with it. Nonetheless, he honestly didn’t know what to do now that he was one-on-one with his father. He didn’t know Paul at all.

“Dad, I’m hungry. Can I have one of those cobbler’s tubers?” Reiner pointed at a stall selling boiled cobbler’s tubers to the poor.

Paul shook his head. “No. Patience, child. Just a little farther.”

“You big liar.” Reiner couldn’t help but whisper his dissatisfaction. He’d been given tough bread and fairly thin soup for breakfast. They weren’t nearly enough to fill his stomach.

“Hey, lemme take you somewhere great,” Paul had said to Reiner after his meager breakfast. “You’ll get to eat your fill of delicious food, so c’mon.”

The thought of standing around hungry at midday while being forced to work at the fortress was unpleasant. Therefore, Reiner accepted his father’s offer, grabbing Paul’s hand and heading out.

“Just hold your horses, okay? We’re going to a restaurant, you see. No need to eat those rotten imperial cobbler’s tubers. You’d regret it if you did. C’mon, over here.” Paul picked Reiner up and put him on his shoulders. The pair entered a back alley and slipped through.

“Dad, what’s that?”

In the center of an empty lot in the middle of town was a door with a cat illustration.

“Hey, this is where I said I was gonna take you. I found it accidentally while

doing the rounds once.”

Whistling, Paul took Reiner to the foot of the door. The thing looked enormous to the young lad. The wood practically shone, and there was a cat and a sign on the front. Something was written on the sign, but Reiner couldn’t read, so he had no clue what the writing stated.

“Dad, what does it say?”

“Ah...it says ‘Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World,’” Paul answered. He’d learned how to read as part of his soldier’s education.

Paul placed his hand on the cold doorknob and turned it. The sound of bells filled the air as the door opened.

The second Paul stepped through, he and his son found themselves in a startlingly well-lit room. The joint was about as packed as the average popular pub; numerous humans, demons, dwarves, and even monsters unknown to Reiner were indulging in unfamiliar meals.

From his position sitting atop his father’s shoulders, Reiner could see the entire restaurant. “Wh-what is this place?”

While he surveyed his surroundings, two women—likely waitresses—greeted Paul and his son.

“Welcome!”

Welcome.

The women looked younger than Reiner’s dead mother. One was a demon girl with golden-blond hair and two black spiral horns; the other was a long-eared girl with black hair and slightly unique facial features.

The blond demon girl flashed a bright smile at Paul. “Let me take you to your table.”

“Awesome.” Paul said. “All right, time to get down.” He let Reiner off his shoulders and followed the young lady to a table.

Despite having no windows, the restaurant was oddly bright. The chairs were extremely comfortable, and a series of different bottles sat atop the well-kept table. As Reiner inspected everything, fascinated by his new surroundings, Paul

immediately made his order.

“I’ll have a beer. This little guy’ll have...let’s see...apple juice or something. Oh, and we’ll have the same food as last time. A large order of deep-fried fish cakes.”

The exact dish Paul had ordered wasn’t on the menu, but the last time he’d asked for it, the restaurant had prepared it for him. Fried fish was delicious, but he’d brought his son here specifically to try something else.

“Excellent,” said the waitress. “Your food will be right out.”

Reiner continued to look around at the rare sights the restaurant offered before asking his father about the dish he’d ordered. “Dad, what’re deep-fried fish cakes?”

“Oh...well, y’see, they’re kind of a weird fish dish. Delicious, though,” Paul answered, his chest puffed out.

“Fish? Bleh.”

Reiner could barely conceal the disappointment on his face as he heard his father’s words. Unlike Paul, who’d been raised in a town by the sea, Reiner had grown up in a border town nowhere near water. Thus, fish were basically nonexistent to him, and he had no desire to eat any.

One time, Paul had bought dried fish from a merchant and given Reiner some. The flavor was incredibly nostalgic to the older man, and he’d enjoyed his portion gladly. To Reiner, however, the dried fish had smelled weird, was hard, tasted overly salty, and just wasn’t very good.

“I don’t want any. Can I get something else instead?”

In response to Reiner’s childlike honesty, Paul simply smiled.

“Now, now. Hold your horses. Don’t knock it till you try it.”

After a little while, the blonde waitress from before returned, food and drink in hand. “Sorry for the wait! Here’s your beer and apple juice. I’ve also brought your large order of deep-fried fish cakes.”

Inside the white container were several light yellow and white objects. Each had yellow-green chopped vegetables and some kind of red spots mixed in. A

bunch of round brown objects surrounded those. Judging by the sizzling noises, they were clearly still very hot.

The waitress placed the dish in the middle of the table and set a small, empty plate down with a bottle. “Feel free to use as much soy sauce as you’d like. Oh, and this seven-flavor mayo’s fairly spicy, so your boy might want to be careful. Take your time and enjoy.”

She smiled and left to take care of another order near where some dwarves sat, eyeing Paul’s food.

“Let’s eat while they’re still hot,” Paul said.

Reiner stared at the deep-fried fish cakes with great confusion and curiosity. First things first, he had to give them a try. He picked up his silver fork and stabbed it into the nearest fish cake.

I asked the master for something that wasn’t fishy, and this is what he brought us, Paul remembered.

When he’d last given his son dried fish, Reiner had thought it was gross. When Paul said as much to the master, this was the plate the restaurant’s owner had made for him. Apparently, the previous master had occasionally made it as well.

The first mouthful should be plain.

Paul opened his mouth and took a big bite. His teeth quickly sliced through the tender fish cake full of hot oil, bringing forth its juices.

Although the cake definitely tasted fishy, it lacked the sea creature’s unique scent. The browned bits mixed with the white stuff’s sweet, salty taste, spreading across his tongue.

Now, this is the good stuff.

Paul’s face broke into a smile as he took a swig of his beer. Its bitter flavor washed the deep-fried fish cake’s taste down his throat. After drinking his fill, Paul let out a satisfied sigh. He paid no mind to Reiner, who gulped loudly. Instead, he moved on to the next fish cake.

This time, he poured lots of white mayo mixed with red stuff over it. The thick

sauce turned the fish cake white. Paul ate about half. *Geez, this hits the spot!*

The fish cake was still extremely hot, but the mayo's gentle sourness and the spicy red stuff mixed in were both delicious.

After taking a last bite of fish cake, Paul turned his attention to the side vegetables arranged on the plate, pouring some black soy sauce onto them.

Soy sauce was intensely salty, so too much of it destroyed the balance of flavors. However, just a dash was enough to bring out the taste of the dish. Paul took another bite, enjoying the fish cake's heat and the vegetables' crunchy texture. Combined with the flavor of his beer, they formed a perfect trio.

Reiner couldn't stand watching his father happily eat away. He grabbed a fork and reached for a fish cake.

"Ow! Hot...! But delish!"

He'd hesitated before the first bite but soon found himself fighting with Paul over the remaining fish cakes.

"See?! Delicious, right?!" Paul called to the waitress. "'Scuse me! Could we get another plate of fish cakes?"

He couldn't help smiling massively as he made an additional order.

Lunchtime was just about over. The father and son returned to the empty lot and simultaneously let out satisfied sighs.

After the door vanished, Paul turned to his son. "Delicious, right?"

Reiner nodded. "I wouldn't mind going with you again."

"You got that right! Just leave it to me."

Paul considered the future. He'd lived as a guard for many years, but that life was about to come to an end. Working as a guard while trying to raise a son in a town like this wasn't realistic.

I suppose we could move back home and help my old man out. You'd be fine with that, right, Reiner? That way, Paul could feed his son fresh fish every day, not the half-rotten dried crap.

As Reiner rode his shoulders, Paul continued to think about their future as a family. His son was still so very light.

Chapter 91:

Katsu Sandwich

Somewhere on the fringes of the capital city of the dead, Gustaff did his best to withstand the splitting pain running through his broken leg. He regretted ever going there.

Dammit. I was in way over my head.

Gustaff had fled his family when he was seventeen years old, with dreams of scoring big as an adventurer. Five years had passed since then.

He was no rookie, having polished his skills and made it through a number of hellish situations. He'd challenged the capital city of the dead in hopes of finally freeing himself from his poverty.

The capital city of the dead was a chaotic place full of hope, desire, fear, and despair. Adventurers like Gustaff looked upon it fondly as a chance to hit it big. Countless treasures awaited within the city, as did tens of thousands of undead.

According to legend, the city had once been the capital of the Ancient Kingdom, the very first human nation. The Ancient Kingdom had freely used all sorts of magical elven tools to dominate the land, and the entire continent had fallen under its rule.

It was more prosperous than any nation to come after it. Its people were blessed with bountiful lives, or so it was said.

But due to his fear of death, the nation's final king had laid his hand upon a forbidden magic one day, and the Ancient Kingdom was no more.

To surpass death itself, the king had transformed into an evil lich, killing the capital's citizens and turning them into undead. Then he'd cursed the land so that any who perished there eventually returned as undead. That was how the king had come to rule forever over a nation of undead.

The Lord of Light's priests had infiltrated the city with holy knights in hopes of using the light to purify the king, returning him to his true form. However, they

too fell to the curse, becoming undead priests.

One country had wished to access the countless treasures locked away within the nation that had vanished centuries ago. They had their greatest commander lead a strike force of knights into the city of the dead. Those courageous warriors were transformed into a pack of dullahans—guardians who destroyed anyone who attempted to set foot in the city.

Then there were the countless adventurers who'd tried and failed to find riches, and the skeletons of monsters who'd gotten themselves hopelessly lost with no way out. They'd become creatures that lived simply for the purpose of dying.

Gustaff sighed, on the verge of tears over his own foolishness and the fact that Lady Luck had left his side. He'd prepared holy water, had a weapon effective against the undead, and thought that his plan to stick near the city's entrance was a good one. That was a relatively safe area where any adventurer with some skill and experience could live to tell the tale the next day. Gustaff was just going to explore around there.

What he hadn't foreseen was that, since his destination was a ruined capital over a hundred years old, all its buildings had aged. Gustaff had carefully tried to explore some ruins, but the second he'd stepped inside, the floor had given way. He fell several stories, injuring his leg.

Given how painful his leg was, Gustaff surmised that it was indeed broken. Climbing out of the hole would be impossible. He could barely walk, never mind run. The closest town containing fellow adventurers seeking the capital city of the dead was about half a day away. He'd die before ever reaching his destination.

So, this is how it ends?

Gustaff gave up and closed his eyes. Since he couldn't move, the most he could hope to do was recover his stamina. Even if all that did was delay his inevitable death by starvation or thirst, he had to believe that fellow adventurers might find him if he survived just a few extra minutes.

For who-knew-how-many hours, Gustaff huddled within the barrier he'd made.

"Heeey! Sir Adventurer!"

As soon as he heard a voice, Gustaff's body trembled. *Crap! Crap!*

The voice in question echoed strangely, almost as though it rode the wind itself. It wasn't the voice of the living. Like the monstrous cries audible in the city of the dead around noon, the voice Gustaff heard was that of the undead.

He didn't want to look, but he had to. Gustaff slowly opened his eyes. The underground area was dark to begin with; the sun had now set, so it was pitch black.

Before Gustaff was an undead. The white man was oddly visible in the darkness, and he stared right back at Gustaff. Where the man's eyes were supposed to be were two dark holes with red lights in the center.

A wraith. A foul creature capable of cursing and murdering even the most seasoned adventurer. Gustaff had no chance of slaying the dangerous undead before his eyes.

"Eeek!" he let out a cry of fear.

"Now, now. No need to panic. I don't plan on killing you. At least, not right now," the wraith said to Gustaff, its tone somewhat leisurely. "First and foremost, I'm hoping to save your life. Can you walk?"

Gustaff nodded frantically. He didn't know what fate this creature had in store for him if he turned down the offer. The wraith didn't appear hostile at the moment, but there was no way to know what an undead was thinking. It was entirely possible that it could attack him at any time.

"Perfect. Follow me."

"A-all right."

The wraith began to move as wraiths did. Gustaff limped after it, holding his equipment and lantern. Fortunately, the wraith's destination really wasn't very far away.

"This is my old body," the wraith said. "As for how I died, well, let's just say I

was in the same sort of situation you found yourself in. I drank holy water and stayed within the barrier I'd set up, which probably allowed me to hold on to myself and talk to you the way I am now."

Gustaff looked at the corpse. It wore adventurer's armor, and one leg was indeed twisted the wrong way. The skeleton's white bones had already yellowed.

Something resembling an undead barrier was scattered underneath the body; next to the corpse was an empty bottle that had likely once contained holy water. Gustaff guessed that the adventurer could no longer survive their thirst.

"Nobody came to help me, so I died," the wraith explained nonchalantly. "Man, how many years has it been? I've been stuck in this dark underground the whole time, so I have no clue how much time's passed."

It pointed deeper into the cave. "After I died, this weird door started appearing over there once every seven days."

Gustaff followed the wraith's pointing finger to a well-kept oak door that looked terribly out of place.

"'Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World'?" Reading the sign on the door aloud, Gustaff couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Wait—is this some kind of eatery?"

The wraith nodded at the adventurer's conclusion.

"Yeah. That sign's actually new. Basically, though, there are people beyond that door. Sadly for me, I can't open it, since I don't have a physical body anymore. But, hell, I'm so curious about what's on the other side. Think you can go take a look for me?"

"All right."

If Gustaff did nothing, he would die. It was his duty as an adventurer to struggle against what seemed to be inevitable death. He made up his mind and opened the door.

The sound of bells filled the air, reminding Gustaff that he'd failed to check for traps. Regardless, he stepped into the unnaturally bright room.

When Aletta and the others had seen the final customer depart, the atmosphere in the restaurant had lightened a bit. Just afterward, the next customer arrived.

A young man covered in grime entered the room. Once he passed through the entrance, he immediately collapsed to the floor, crying from the pain that seemed to come from his leg.

“Oh my gosh!” Aletta cried.

“Everyone, calm down!” exclaimed the master.

Things were clearly bad, but nonetheless, he approached the young man on the floor coolheadedly.

Every now and then, the door to the other world opened, and a visitor who’d fallen upon some tragedy stumbled through. The master used to think that was just a coincidence, but lately, he’d realized that wasn’t the case at all.

Until recently, the Restaurant to Another World’s door only had Japanese signage, so nobody from the other world could read what it said. To folks in the other world who didn’t know about the restaurant, the entrance was nothing but a sketchy doorway that appeared at random.

Those who turned its knob were either intensely curious or people who felt that—even if it were a trap—whatever was on the door’s other side couldn’t possibly be worse than their current situation.

The master knelt and checked the man’s leg. After taking a look at the incredibly swollen limb, he turned to Aletta.

“This is definitely broken. Aletta, go to the back and grab the ointment from the first aid box.”

“O-of course!” Aletta was a bit frazzled but managed to nod, and then ran to fetch the ointment.

The ointment in Nekoya's first aid box was one of its mysteries. It was in a small perfume bottle, the type you could find anywhere. But the stuff inside was what was special. One spray of it on any burn, bruise, sprain, or cut was enough to relieve pain in record time.

As for what the spray was actually made from—well, it combined otherworldly ingredients that the previous master had gotten his hands on with an ointment he'd purchased from a merchant who frequented the restaurant.

That ointment was a well-known product in the magical world and typically cost one gold coin. It was an amazing medicine that fixed not just broken bones but even partial paralysis.

"Master! I have the spray!"

"Aye. Thanks." The master crouched again, pulling up Gustaff's pant leg. "Sir, this'll sting a little bit, so hold tight."

He twisted the cap off the bottle and applied the liquid directly to the adventurer's swollen, discolored leg.

"G-gaaaaah!" Gustaff screamed aloud as the ointment touched his leg—but then quickly lifted his head. "The pain...it's gone!"

The master flashed a smile at him. "Thank goodness. You should be fine now. By the way, we happen to be a restaurant, so it's all right if you'd like to order something. What we can offer you right now is a bit limited, but..."

The moment Gustaff heard the master's words, his stomach growled loudly. Due to the excruciating pain in his leg, he hadn't eaten anything.

As he sat back in his soft, comfortable chair, Gustaff got lost in thought. *How did this even happen? Wasn't it the middle of the night?* It was neither hot nor cold in the oddly well-lit room.

The expensive ice in Gustaff's water noisily bumped against the cup's sides. His leg pain was gone, and he heard the master preparing food in the kitchen, making his stomach rumble.

Only moments earlier, Gustaff had been anticipating his own death. With that

thought, he sipped his water.

Ah...this is really good.

The water was as cold as that fetched from a winter well. It even smelled faintly of some fruit Gustaff was unfamiliar with. The cold liquid quenched his thirst and filled his body, revitalizing him.

Just as Gustaff began to relax, a demon girl with golden-blond hair appeared with a white dish in hand. “Sorry for the wait. Here’s your food.”

Sitting atop the dish was some sort of square food with brown and black ingredients sandwiched in the middle.

“Um...what exactly is this?”

The girl smiled. “A katsu sandwich! It’s super-duper delicious. Take your time and enjoy! Oh—let me get you some more water.”

The blond demon waitress returned to the kitchen. After watching her depart, Gustaff turned his attention to the food in front of him. “A k-katsu sandwich...?”

Just what exactly is this thing?

He cleaned his dirty hands with the moist, tightly folded cloth on the table, looking at the plate of food. “Well, whatever it is, I’m hungry. Down the hatch!”

The dish hadn’t taken all that long to prepare, so Gustaff assumed that it was something the master had premade in the kitchen. It exuded an extremely appetizing aroma. In its center was some sort of lightly browned meat cut into pieces.

It’s probably not poisoned. If the master was going to kill Gustaff, he wouldn’t have used such an expensive ointment on him.

With that in mind, Gustaff picked up the katsu sandwich. “Is this...white bread?”

Now that the sandwich was in his hands, he realized that the meat in the middle was sandwiched between slices of white bread—high-quality white bread, at that.

The bread was toasted brown, but its center was white, like linen. Now that Gustaff held the sandwich in his hands, he felt that the bread's surface was nice and crispy, but its surprisingly soft insides pushed back against his fingers.

Those two slices of bread sandwiched strips of thickly sliced meat with brownish breading; each had a thin marbling of white fat. That was positively mouthwatering, since Gustaff had only eaten rations since yesterday.

I'm starting to feel really good about this.

Gustaff had no clue what to expect from this random restaurant's food. After careful inspection, though, he deduced that it looked delicious. He took a large bite of the square sandwich.

As soon as he did, he was overcome with intense joy at the flavor that surpassed even his wildest dreams. "Oooh!"

The toasted bread was crunchy outside and soft inside, with a sweet wheat flavor. Beyond the bread was the meat's brown coating, which wasn't completely dissimilar to how cooks in the Empire fried meat coated in flour.

The meat had clearly been flavored and seasoned in all sorts of ways. One mouthful brought forth an array of great tastes: sweet and sour, and a slight spiciness to the breading. Those flavors mixed with the juices and flavorful fat of the meat within, creating one great taste.

Gustaff determined the sandwich's fate after taking a single bite. Like some starving dog that hadn't eaten in days, he devoured the katsu sandwich. Around the time the waitress came back with more water, the adventurer's plate was empty.

The master refused to accept payment for the medicine. In his words, Gustaff seemed to be in a bit of trouble, so that was the perfect time to use it. He also agreed to put the food bill on the adventurer's tab this time.

Gustaff barely found the words to express his gratitude to the man as he passed back through the doorway, remembering that he was still in the city of the dead.

“Yo. Looks to me like whatever’s past that door is pretty incredible.”

Gustaff instinctively turned to face the wraith who’d granted him this opportunity. The door was long gone.

The wraith smiled at Gustaff. “To be honest, I didn’t know for sure whether you’d recover or not. But I had a favor I was gonna ask you if you came out in one piece. Do you mind?”

“Wh-what is it?”

Gustaff would at least hear the wraith out. If he turned down the creature now, it’d probably bare its fangs at him.

“No worries. It’s nothing super tough.” The wraith looked down at its corpse. “Could you take my short sword and journal to the capital for me? I wasn’t able to become a successful treasure hunter like my old man and my big brother, but I at least want them to know that I perished. I wanna spare them the pain of worrying about my safety. Thanks, pal.”

The wraith vanished. Even after it disappeared, Gustaff felt a pair of eyes watching him. His stomach, which he’d just filled with the katsu sandwich, began aching ever so slightly.

“I guess I’ve got no choice.”

The adventurer dug through the corpse’s things, eventually finding a worn journal and an old, rusty short sword. He put both items with his own.

It’d take Gustaff at least a month to get to the capital. From the condition of the adventurer’s bones, he’d probably died decades ago. It was likely that his father and brother were no longer of this world.

Still, perhaps their children were alive. Gustaff had to at least try searching them out, lest the wraith come back to kill him. Despite that, Gustaff remained grateful that he’d somehow made it out of his first visit to the city of the dead with his life. Next time, he’d be careful not to fall into any holes.

Polishing the short sword in hopes of finding clues about its owner, Gustaff spotted the name “Julius Gold” engraved on it.

By delivering the sword to the capital, he wound up receiving a reward equal

to a great deal of treasure. But that's a story for another time.

Chapter 92:

Mille Crepe Cake

The queen of the Land of Flowers, Tiana Silvario XVI, read through the tiny letter. To reach her, it had passed through numerous faeries' hands. Each word was written in the Land of Flowers' ink made of honey and pollen.

"Little ones with bat wings, eh?"

The letter was sent by Tielia, Tiana's younger sister and an adventurer who'd left the kingdom.

Every now and then, faeries of the Land of Flowers left the country and traveled among their world's humans. Those faeries were typically inquisitive and skilled enough at magic to protect themselves. Despite the safety that came with living in the Land of Flowers, the country lacked the excitement those specific faeries desired; they left to satisfy their own curiosity.

What faeries typically lacked in stamina, they made up for in magical prowess. They weren't a race to be underestimated. Most of those who left for the human world called themselves mercenaries or adventurers, traveling with humans, half-elves, and dwarves. Some faeries returned after a big adventure, having amassed a great deal of skill, but some ultimately became corpses.

It had been some time since Tiana had received a letter from her little sister. It was full of seasonal greetings, stories of things Tielia had seen and heard on her journey, and even a direct request.

"I entrusted a letter to the little ones who saved me," Tielia's letter explained. "I imagine that they'll eventually find their way to the Land of Flowers. Please treat them as welcome guests, hey?"

Apparently, while journeying as an adventurer in the human world, Tielia had come across a horrific bloodsucking race called "vampires" and engaged one in

battle. A group of small people with bat-like green wings had saved her.

The group had all worn the same clothes and were led by a single man. They could spit acid, and they engaged the powerful vampire unarmed—madness, considering that the bloodsucking creature’s skin was hard enough to repel swords. They tore the vampire to shreds with their bare hands, using their whip-like tails to defeat the foe. They were more powerful than even Tielia’s strongest dwarf friend.

Paulo, the group’s mature leader, seemed to be in a class all his own. When the vampire turned into mist and attempted to flee, he used a strange power to transform into a dragon and take the creature down in a single breath.

Tielia and her friends were saved from having their blood sucked in the nick of time. They quickly expressed their gratitude to the small people. Then their mysterious saviors asked whether the party knew of anyplace where small folk like themselves lived, and Tiana’s little sister told them of the Land of Flowers.

After thinking for a moment, the queen decided how to handle her little sister’s saviors. “I suppose that’s fine. I shall meet them. After what they’ve done, it is only right and just that I respect their request.”

She turned to the Land of Flowers’ chancellor. “You understand, yes? According to this letter, a group of small people who can soar through the sky will eventually visit our land. Make sure to prepare for them. I imagine it will probably be the Day of Satur after next when they arrive.”

“Yes, Your Highness. But...um...what does any of this have to do with the Day of Satur?” the chancellor asked, tilting their head.

The Day of Satur held great meaning and importance in the Land of Flowers, but the chancellor didn’t understand how that linked with welcoming a group of foreigners into the country.

“Please. They saved my dearest little sister from death itself. In other words, we must celebrate! We shall order cake!”

A half-elf mage acquaintance of the queen’s had once told her about another land and its special baked goods for joyous occasions.

Despite being the Land of Flowers’ queen, Tiana couldn’t very well make

decisions about crepes on her own. Her sister's rescue was the perfect opportunity to order the pastry she'd heard of many moons ago. Or, at least, Tiana quietly thought as much to herself.

On the border of the Land of Flowers, a group of small, dragon-winged priests descended the peak of a treacherous stone mountain. From that mountain, one could distinguish a flower field from the grasslands.

"I believe that's the Land of Flowers Lady Tielia mentioned, Lord Paulo."

Paulo—the Lord of Green's high priest—transformed his eyes into a dragon's, capable of seeing thousands of miles into the distance. Confirming the massive flower field's existence, he nodded to the priestess beside him, who happened to be his beloved wife.

"Indeed it is. Let me go talk to them first. I'll have you and the others wait here."

"Understood. Please, be careful."

At his wife's response, Paulo spread his wings and launched himself into the sky.

I certainly hope that the ones who live here are as agreeable as Lady Tielia.

Paulo had left his longtime home in the south and headed to the Northern Continent for missionary purposes. The northern regions were full of barbarians and savages.

According to rumors, the Lord of Blue, the ruler of the ocean, had directly ordered several high priests and servants to search for something on the Northern Continent—the same land where legends said the long-eared invaders lived.

Servants of the Lord of Blue could move in the water with great ease. By contrast, crossing the ocean was tremendously difficult as a follower of any other god.

The Lord of Blue, who lived deep within the ocean, was willing to give other

gods' servants permission to cross overseas if they went through the proper steps. The only issue was that gaining the Lord of Blue's permission didn't eliminate vicious waves, storms, or dangerous monsters that lacked enough knowledge to worship a god.

After hearing stories from a traveler who'd visited the Northern Continent, the Lord of Green's followers had held a discussion among themselves. They decided that, of all the races that worshiped the Lord of Green, Paulo and his Lilliputians would be perfect to send as missionaries to the Northern Continent.

The Lilliputians called the woods their home and were extremely passionate believers, even compared to the Lord of Green's other races. Their small bodies made it difficult for larger races to notice them. They also didn't require much in the way of food. Additionally, many Lilliputians were enthusiastic about becoming strong enough to compete with other races, despite their size. On top of that, they were skilled at controlling their dragon wings.

More importantly, Lilliputians like Paulo had, after intense training, become high priests and priestesses. Lilliputian priests capable of controlling their dragon wings were chosen for the journey with Paulo as their leader. They would head all the way to the Northern Continent as a missionary group.

It didn't take them long to realize just how trying a journey that would truly be.

Against all odds, they'd managed to cross the blue ocean and even memorize the Northern Continent's language. In most areas of the continent, the language was based on that of the long-eared invaders, so the Lilliputians learned it fairly easily.

It was everything that came after that turned the journey into quite a struggle. Truth be told, it would've been much harder if Paulo hadn't been present. He was a seasoned veteran more than capable of taking down most opponents. Fortunately, the entire group knew what sort of dangers to expect, so they crossed overseas without a single death.

As luck had it, savages were abundant in the Northern Continent, where the light of God couldn't reach. In the land of the long-eared invaders, those who worshiped gods were hard to come by. Oddly enough, the beings referred to as

“gods” in the Northern Continent took the form of humans, not dragons. Furthermore, their followers didn’t know how to transform into dragons modeled after their gods. They could only use unique skills based on elements their gods held dominion over. Even those as faithful as the southern high priests had incredibly weak bodies.

On top of that, one could count on both hands the number of races that believed in the gods: humans, half-elves, dwarves, and a few others. Those on the continent scoffed at the mere idea that someone like Paulo, from a race of small beings other races rarely saw, could ever become a priest.

There were even fools who mistook Paulo and the other missionaries for a new dragon-winged race, seeking to capture and sell them like some sort of attraction.

Ironically, the only race on the Northern Continent as devout as Paulo and the others were the demons who worshiped the Million Colors of Chaos. In fact, they held dominion over their own land within the Empire and seemed prosperous.

In Paulo’s home, there were numerous beast people and manticores among the Lord of Green’s devotees, but tribes also worshiped Gold, Red, and Black. Goblins and ogres worshiped the Lord of Green, just as Paulo and his companions did, and had settlements throughout the continent. Then there were the lamia. At home, they passionately followed the Lord of Red, with high priestesses scattered across the land.

Back where Paulo came from, all those races could be reasoned with, although there were differences between their cultures.

But on the Northern Continent, they were nothing but savages that couldn’t have cared less about the gods’ teachings. They simply had no interest in learning about Paulo’s faith, so they hurt and robbed the missionaries remorselessly. Constantly hunted down and treated as intelligent beasts, the small folk had no choice but to flee them.

Among the worst of the Northern Continent’s residents were the fools with the Lord of Black’s direct blood blessings, the brood beloved by the dark of night, who didn’t even worship the Goddess of Darkness—known to Paulo as

the Lord of Black.

Paulo and his fellow believers thought regularly about how badly they wished to obtain that sort of power, the grace of God. Therefore, hearing those fools claim that the Goddess of Darkness was a being to be scorned, and wasn't worth worshiping, was unforgivable. It enraged Paulo, and together with his comrades, he sought to take down the Lord of Black's brood.

During their missionary journey, the Lilliputians had encountered faeries. At home, Paulo's people either worshiped the Lord of Gold, who held dominion over the skies, or the Lord of Green, who held dominion over the earth. In this new land, however, they were apparently friendly with the long-eared invaders known as elves on the Northern Continent.

The faeries—who'd descended from that race—seemed to have little interest in, or familiarity with, the gods the humans worshiped. However, they possessed the same techniques known as "magic" that the long-eared invaders had. The faeries had formed their own unique culture and carved out a kingdom for themselves on rich, fertile land.

The faeries were a small race not unlike Paulo and the other missionaries. They didn't believe in the gods, but could be reasoned with.

The faery girl that Paulo happened to meet upon slaying a member of the Black Brood had explained that she was actually the little sister of the woman who led her people. The Lilliputians' next destination was then decided; they continued their journey and finally made their way to the Land of Flowers.

So, this is the place? I see.

As soon as Paulo descended into the Land of Flowers, his experience as the Lord of Green's high priest enabled him to sense the region's tremendous magical power. It was so remarkable that, had Paulo been back home, things would immediately have devolved into a struggle over the land.

The area was so rich in magical power that it could've been called a holy land—a place governed by a high priest or priestess.

This is incredibly fertile land. I feel the strong blessings of the Lord of Green here. It makes sense that the faeries call this place home.

As Paulo flew into the nation covered in blooming pink flowers, its residents came out to greet him, as if to support that thought.

In their hands were wooden staves; on their backs were insectoid wings completely different from dragon wings. An ogre-like titan made of vines, likely created by the faeries to protect their land, stood with them. The faeries' eyes said they were on guard.

"From your appearance, I assume you to be the little folk with bat wings whom Lady Tielia mentioned in her letter," one faery said.

"Not quite. The wings on our backs are dragon wings, given to us by the Lord of Green. Make no mistake, however, we have come here on Lady Tielia's invitation."

As a high priest, Paulo made a point of emphasizing the faeries' error before taking out the note Tielia had given him.

"Hrm...this is genuine. You and your people are now our nation's guests. Queen Tiana will see you; follow me. Ah—what of the others?"

"I have them waiting outside," Paulo replied. "Let me call them."

If nothing else, it appeared as though the faeries wouldn't attack the Lilliputians anytime soon. With that in mind, Paulo went back to his companions.

Well, I certainly hope this queen and her people have at least some understanding of God's heart.

With that concern in his stomach, Paulo headed to the mountain, where his wife and the others waited patiently.

The Land of Flowers reverently welcomed Paulo and his people as heroes for saving Queen Tiana Silvario XVI's little sister. Numerous faeries showered the group with words of gratitude, and faery children innocently approached Paulo and his people, seeming to take great pleasure in observing their similar-but-different wings.

At home, that would've been considered rude behavior toward a high priest

and his companions. However, it was clear that it wasn't done out of malice or a desire to reject the Lilliputians' beliefs.

Hmm. This is quite a lovely land. It's completely unscathed by war.

Gripping his wife's hand, which had found his out of concern, Paulo calmly observed his surroundings. The faeries, who were no different in size from the Lilliputians, truly called a beautiful land their home. It was full of enough magical energy to be a holy land, and flowers bloomed regardless of the season.

The faeries told Paulo that they ate honey and flower seeds, so they were never left wanting for food. Furthermore, in the past hundred years, there'd been no war to speak of. Looking at the faery citizens made that clear; not a single one wore the scars of battle.

Paulo had met many different people on his journey through the land. Besides a handful who inhabited capital cities, however, most lived very poor lives. The Land of Flowers' standard of living was clearly much higher than elsewhere on the continent.

As he considered the faeries' living conditions, Paulo kept flying forward, eventually spotting a building made of vines and flowers. In front stood a woman with bright green hair.

Paulo could tell who she was at first glance, thanks to the powerful magical energy emanating from her. The girl named Tielia had an impressive magical energy level, but the woman in front of him had powers rivaling his as a high priest. She was clearly the ruler.

"Welcome! My little sister owes you all a great deal. I am Tiana Silvario XVI, queen of this great nation." The woman introduced herself.

As a show of respect, Paulo did the same. "You have our immense gratitude for accepting us into your homeland on this day. My name is Paulo, and I come from the far lands of the Southern Continent. I am no one significant, but the rank of high priest was granted to me by the Lord of Green, ruler of the earth. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Tiana narrowed her eyes in response to Paulo's greeting. She immediately voiced what she'd noticed.

“Oho! You come from the south? I see now. Your clothes and skin color—you come from the same place as *they* do.”

“‘They’?”

“Yes.” Tiana nodded. “I happen to know someone who dresses similarly to you all, has the same dark skin, and possesses magical powers on your level.”

“Is that so? Where did you run into this person?” Could another high priest from Paulo’s homeland have crossed over?

“In the other world, actually.”

“Excuse me?” Paulo seemed stunned by the queen’s words. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you see, once every seven days, a door connecting to another world appears here in the Land of Flowers,” the queen explained. “I met the person in question there.”

“Actually, perfect timing,” she went on. “As fate would have it, the door to the other world is scheduled to appear here tomorrow. We planned on throwing you a welcome banquet there and would be ever so pleased if you joined us.”

“Of course. But why a banquet in another world...?”

Tiana’s smile deepened. “Beyond the door is a place called the Restaurant to Another World. It serves all manner of otherworldly snacks and pastries.”

“Er, what?” Once again, Paulo looked stunned.

The next day came, and the sound of bells filled the air as the door to the other world opened.

As soon as the group stepped through, a follower of Chaos wearing a bizarre outfit greeted them. She seemed friendly with Tiana.

“Welcome, Lady Tiana! We have your mille crepe cake ready to go!”

“Many thanks,” Tiana replied. “I thought we’d come by within seven days of ordering, but we cut it much closer than I planned. I’m glad it didn’t go to

waste.”

As soon as the follower of Chaos revealed herself, Paulo told his companions to calm their nerves and hostility. “Remember, we were invited here by Lady Tiana. Don’t do anything that casts shame upon me.”

He glanced around the room for the first time. *I feel the strong presence of fire and even a bit of darkness. It’s almost like a holy land. I knew it.*

Paulo’s vertically slit dragon eyes made out the gods’ powers flowing through the restaurant and quickly discovered who Tiana had been talking about.

The legless Lucia and Katalina of the White, eh?

Among all the continent’s high priests and priestesses, those two were particularly well known for their immensely strong powers and faith.

Lucia had evidently just finished eating a meal with a priest she’d likely chosen to be the lamia “husband.” She wore a big smile as she spoke to him. Katalina, on the other hand, was alone, waiting for the meal she’d ordered to arrive.

I understand now. No wonder nobody’s causing a fuss.

Earlier in the morning, the queen had explained to Paulo that conflict was off-limits in the other world. He’d wondered why and how that was the case. Now that he was actually in the restaurant, it all made sense.

Paulo had heard that, some ten years earlier, Lucia and Katalina had found themselves on the same battlefield. The light and fire of their fierce standoff had burned the area to nothing. If two people like them had fought here, it would’ve been catastrophic.

They weren’t the only powerful beings present. Numerous strong individuals were visiting the restaurant, starting with Tiana at his side. Not all were as powerful as Paulo, but that said, even somebody as skilled as him wouldn’t stand a chance if they tried to pick a fight here.

“I’ll be right out with your food. Hold on for just a moment.” The follower of Chaos retreated to the kitchen.

“Over here, Sir Paulo,” said Tiana.

“Ah. Let’s go.” Paulo motioned to the priests accompanying him, and they followed Tiana to a giant table likely meant for humans.

Paulo overheard the faeries’ conversation.

“What’s up with today’s crepe?”

“Well, I heard that the queen specially ordered something called a mille crepe cake to celebrate Sir Paulo’s arrival.”

“What is it?”

“Beats me. But I know it’s a pastry for special occasions. The queen apparently heard that from Lady Victoria.”

The faeries were clearly excited about what was coming their way.

“Lord Paulo...?” said a Lilliputian priest.

“Come now, they’re throwing this banquet for us,” Paulo said. “It would be rude not to accept their hospitality. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

Paulo and the others weren’t particularly knowledgeable about the Northern Continent’s customs, never mind the customs of a completely different world. They had no clue what the queen had requested.

I imagine that mille crepe cake is some sort of sweet pastry.

The meal the faeries had treated Paulo and his companions to the previous night was a rather sugary dish of honey-covered flower seeds. Judging by that, the faeries clearly loved confections in general.

Eventually, a human—likely the master of the restaurant—came out with a dish in hand. “Sorry about the wait. Here’s the mille crepe cake you ordered.”

As soon as he spoke up, the faeries immediately moved away from the table’s center. The master put the plate down in the open space.

Paulo’s first impression was that the mountain sitting on the plate was thick, round, and egg-colored. At its very top was some stuff that reflected the ceiling light.

What’s this thing? It’s huge. Some sort of fried egg, perhaps?

“Let me cut this up for you.” With the large silver knife in his hand, the master

gently cut the mountain into small slices.

If he'd done so the usual way, the cake wouldn't have looked as delicious, so he carefully cut it into long, thin pieces. First, he cut the mille crepe cake in half, then in quarters, then eighths, then sixteenths. Any further, and it would've fallen apart, so the master stopped there and began putting the slices on small plates the waitress brought over.

As he placed cake on the plates, the faeries offered each other their impressions and predictions.

"Hoh! This mille crepe cake's quite a pretty dessert."

"Fruit crepes are beautiful, but this has its own artistry in and of itself."

"That's all whipped cream, eh? Wonder what it tastes like."

Meanwhile, Paulo and the Lilliputians were dumbfounded by the otherworldly cake in front of them.

This is a pastry?

It was absolutely nothing like the pastry the Lilliputians were familiar with. Removed from the main mountain, the mille crepe slices had a mysterious makeup. Their insides were bright yellow and white layers, set atop each other numerous times. The pattern was nearly perfect, with each stripe the same length and size. The cake was so beautiful, in fact, that it felt as though it'd be a waste to eat any of it.

"Take your time and enjoy." The master had a happy expression and was clearly pleased that they were so struck by the cake's beauty. He disappeared into the back.

"Shall we eat? That plate there is for our guests. Nobody else touch it," Tiana warned the faeries strictly and seriously.

The faeries quickly withdrew from the plate next to Paulo and the other Lilliputians, flying to the other plate instead. Once the queen gave them permission, the faeries began to cut into their "prey."

"Lord Paulo...?"

"Lady Tiana is treating us. Let us partake."

Hearing her husband give the okay, Paulo's wife approached the mille crepe cake. She took a piece from the top and respectfully offered it to him.

"Then you should be the first to eat, Lord Paulo. Otherwise, the rest of us couldn't possibly indulge."

"I suppose you're right." Paulo nodded and took the slice from his wife's whipped cream-covered brown hands.

Hoh, this top layer... Some kind of boiled fruit?

As a high priest, Paulo had a sharpened sense of smell that he'd trained for years on end. It allowed him to immediately recognize what was spread over the cake's surface: some normally sour fruit, boiled in sugar acquired from another race.

The great thing about the stuff was that it was easy to store, and even a bit of it gave someone the energy to live. The Lilliputians were a little race, so it was difficult for them to hunt wild beasts without a priest's help, or even to farm and harvest corn. Therefore, this stuff was a popular food among Paulo's people.

When Paulo had been just a powerless young lad, he'd often eaten it as well. As he thought back on his youth, he at last bit into the mille crepe cake.

"This is delicious..." Paulo hadn't intended to think aloud, but did so nonetheless.

Within the mille crepe cake's sweetness were the sour, slightly bitter jam; the crepes' soft, egg-yellow surface; and the perfectly sweet whipped cream. The top of the crepe had all those elements, and they combined and spread magically through his mouth.

Paulo took another bite. This time, it was free of jam, allowing him to experience the flavors of the whipped cream and crepe on their own.

Paying real attention to the pastry's taste, however, Paulo realized that it still ever so faintly tasted of sour fruit. The balance between the whipped cream and crepe was different, so the cream's taste was stronger. Its milk flavor helped suppress its rich sweetness as it dissolved from his mouth's heat.

Once the cream vanished into thin air, all that remained was its aftertaste.

The crepe is delicious, too. It reminded him of a dish the Lilliputians made back in his homeland; they beat cornstarch in water and fried it. Ultimately, however, that was considered food for the poor. This was entirely different.

The master had likely beaten eggs as well as water into the mixture. Judging by how well the crepe paired with whipped cream, he'd probably added milk as well.

I bet this'd be delicious with meat or marmett.

Paulo continued to dig into the perfect little dessert. Eventually, the last tiny piece found its way to the bottom of his stomach.

As he finished, he noticed that the other priests had begun to feast. They were frantic, almost like a herd of beasts eating livestock thrown to them. The mille crepe cake was tall compared to Paulo and his friends, but it gradually became smaller and smaller.

Noticing the priests' behavior, Paulo panicked and quickly neared the plate. "Wait! Wait! I haven't had my fill!"

The banquet to welcome Paulo and his friends continued until everyone had eaten far too much.

Tiana and Paulo returned to the Land of Flowers with full stomachs. The ride wasn't an easy one.

"Well, did you enjoy yourself, Sir Paulo?" The ruler smiled.

"Yes. Thank you very much, Lady Tiana," he responded.

"That's wonderful. I hope we can continue this amicable relationship for a long time to come," Tiana said, her smile deepening.

"If at all possible," said Paulo, "we wondered whether we might get permission to spread the word of our almighty Lord of Green throughout your land. We would never force anyone to become a follower, of course."

"You have my permission. Feel free to use the Land of Flowers as a hub from

which to spread your god's teachings through the continent. We welcome you as friends here, high priest of the Lord of Green."

Only after visiting the restaurant had Tiana truly learned how vast the world was. These little missionaries from a mysterious, unknown land were part of that very world.

Tiana still didn't know the Lilliputians all that well, but she was certain that they had no ill intent. Now that she knew that much, she felt relieved. That was why Tiana had been so willing to accept Paulo's request.

On that day, the seeds of cultural exchange were planted firmly in the ground.

Chapter 93:

Carpaccio, Once More

Once every seven days, Henry used teleportation magic to transport himself to the lake on the other side of the mountain in order to draw the landscape. He did so because he was a court mage serving a small nation, and this had been his hobby for the past few years.

Hrm. The weather's so nice that you can really see far out.

The lake was home to water spirits and full of magical energies. Its calm, still surface reflected the white clouds and blue sky like a mirror. In the middle of the lake...was a door with a cat illustration.

Well, you don't see that every day.

Henry could tell that the single door hovering in the lake's center was some sort of magical relic. It stood above the water's surface unsupported and had no reflection.

It was intensely clear that this door went against the physics of Henry's world. It was likely elven technology lost thousands of years ago. It seemed almost as though this strange rectangle in the middle of the blue and white realms connected the heavens and the earth.

Henry had first set eyes upon the door when he'd come here in search of lake water as an ingredient for one of his potions. Needless to say, he was surprised. It truly was a strange sight to behold.

I wonder what's on the other side of the door? he thought as he prepared to sketch.

He'd asked himself that very question so many times that he'd lost count.

Henry was both a wandering adventurer and an artist. He'd learned how to use magic from his father, who was a painter.

Since his father had feared damaging his hands through weapon-to-weapon combat, he'd learned magic that allowed him to decimate his opponents.

Henry's father, a half-elf, had spent some two hundred years after his birth seeking rare sights and sounds. After getting so old that it was no longer possible to wander the world, he'd settled down in this country.

That was back when the giant, savage Empire had set its enemies on fire and absorbed them, making veteran mages like Henry's father extremely valuable.

Half-elves weren't allowed to hold high posts, naturally, so Henry's father had been hired as something of a mercenary mage. During each important battle, however, he was consulted as though he were an admiral. Eventually, a noble offered him their daughter for marriage. Upon coming of age, the human boy she gave birth to would immediately be given the post of court mage.

Maybe that was why, after over a hundred years living as a wanderer, Henry's father had chosen that land as his final home. Once his son grew up, he passed away.

Twenty years had passed since his death. The vicious emperor was gone from this world, replaced by his less-than-ambitious son, which ultimately calmed the whole nation. Its last bit of expansion had been ten years ago, when it absorbed a port town.

That was nothing but good news, since the small country that Henry lived in feared that the flames of war would sweep it up one day. Nobody knew how long it would last, but at least there was peace.

Aside from dealing with goblins or bandits from time to time, Henry rarely had to use his powers as court mage on the battlefield. That meant he could focus on his other position: court painter.

The job of court painter wasn't particularly interesting. Unlike other nations, such as the venerable Duchy or the wealthy Kingdom, Henry's homeland didn't really have the leeway to nurture the arts. Thus, artists were restricted to painting familiar sights such as the castle garden or portraits of the royal family and other important figures.

Henry found the job terribly boring compared to that of his father, who'd wandered the land in search of fascinating views, leaving behind a series of paintings of rare landscapes.

I love scenery like this. It's just so fascinating. I see why father wandered around until his old age, Henry thought, once again reminded that he was truly his father's son. As he continued to paint, the sun crossed the center of the sky. Before Henry knew it, it began to grow dark.

"I suppose it's time to wrap things up." Deciding to head back before nightfall, Henry started to gather his tools.

Once he had everything in order, he used his teleportation magic and vanished.

All that remained was the door above the lake, once again unused.

A while after that, Henry noticed something about the door in the middle of the lake.

Huh? Is it just me, or is it different today?

It was almost as if the door's owner had changed or something.

What is this feeling? As Henry tried to figure out what was so odd, he stumbled upon the answer. Something resembling a brand-new sign hung on the door near the cat plaque.

Wait, what's that? Is that writing?

It was hard to make out from so far away, but there appeared to be writing on the sign. From the size of the letters, it seemed to be in the basic language, but Henry couldn't read them from this distance.

I suppose I'll go take a look. Struck by curiosity about the sudden change, Henry used magic to walk across the water and approach the door for the first time.

Standing before the oak door, he read the words on the sign. "It's a restaurant?"

“Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World.” That’s what the sign read.

“You’re telling me this is a restaurant door?”

If the sign was telling the truth, that was indeed the case. But why would anyone have put a restaurant entrance there of all places? And who would think to use it?

Henry absentmindedly put his hand on the golden doorknob. It naturally turned a bit; he immediately let go. It wasn’t locked?

So, I can just go in...?

Henry walked to the door’s other side, but it was an exact replica of the front, sign and all. There was no way to tell where it connected to.

After puzzling over the door for a bit, Henry once again gripped the doorknob, turning it as hard as he could.

The bells attached to the door rang. Henry passed hastily through the entrance, as if pressured by the sound.

Upon reaching the other side, he found himself in another world. *Wh-what is this place?!*

Henry sensed the door close tightly behind him as he trembled. The room that spread out before him was lit with some mysterious light that was neither the sun nor the kind that the Lord of Light’s priests could generate.

The room wasn’t particularly large, and it was full of people eating.

S-some sort of monster restaurant?!

No, that wasn’t quite right. Humans, elves, dwarves, demons, and even monsters were present, and all of them were dining.

Just as Henry instinctively began to cast a spell, he heard a voice coming from behind him and spun around.

Welcome. All combat is off-limits here. It doesn’t matter who you are. No fighting. No magic, either.

A single emotionless elf with black hair stood before him. Her mouth was closed as she talked; she spoke directly to his brain.

This is Nekoya, the Restaurant to Another World. It's a place where people eat food, so eat.

Although there were all manner of vicious monsters in the restaurant, the elf girl showed no sign of being scared. That, in and of itself, was somewhat scary. However, her words were enough to remove some of Henry's fear, untangling his nerves a bit.

"O-okay," he said.

You can sit here.

The girl seemed to realize that, although Henry was on guard, he was willing to listen to what she had to say. She was clearly used to this sort of thing, and she led him to a seat. It happened to be right next to a giant, scar-covered lizardman who was impossible to read.

"If this is an otherworldly restaurant, what sort of food is there?" Henry asked the girl. He ignored the lizardman shoveling some kind of egg dish into his mouth.

What kind of food do you like?

"Let's see." Henry thought for a moment before answering. "Is there some special otherworldly dish one can only get here?"

A special otherworldly dish?

"Yeah. Something I could never eat in my world. Something rare. Oh, and I'm not particularly fond of sweets, so no pastries or anything."

Although Henry was technically nobility, he'd lived his entire life in the small nation he was born in. He was quietly thrilled to visit such a foreign and exotic place for the first time. That was why he wanted to try something he could only get there.

How about carpaccio? It's made from raw fish.

Henry was altogether unfamiliar with the strange food the elf girl recommended. "You can eat raw fish? I've heard that fish smells terrible uncooked and can even hurt your stomach."

He was puzzled. Back where he came from, the fish that people gathered

from rivers and lakes smelled like dirt, and they did a number on one's stomach if not cooked properly. As someone living in the nation's so-called capital, Henry rarely ate fish.

They're eating it over there, the black-haired waitress answered without blinking, pointing at another table.

Henry followed the girl's finger to the diners in question and furrowed his brow. She was pointing at a pair of young women with large wings on their backs. Due to his line of work, Henry was somewhat familiar with monsters, so he knew the women to be creatures called sirens.

Sirens lived close to the ocean and sang, inviting passing sailors to their deaths. Henry had read in a book that they ate fish and living humans who'd fallen from their ships. They were terrible, horrifying creatures.

"They're monsters, though," he said. "Are you sure it's all right for humans to have raw fish?"

Don't worry. I asked the master to prepare the dish for a human.

Henry had no idea how the waitress had spoken to the master, but she didn't seem to be lying. Since she was an elf, she was likely far more experienced than Henry in the ways of magic.

"All right. In that case, I'll go with carpaccio." If someone at the restaurant guaranteed the meal's safety, Henry had no reason to question them.

Excellent. Please wait a bit.

The waitress gently placed a glass of ice water on the table and vanished into the back.

Now then... Henry swallowed the cold water, which had just a hint of fruitiness. It ran down his throat as he surveyed the restaurant. *Hoh! Well, what've we got here?*

The first visitors Henry had noticed were dangerous monsters. Upon second glance, however, there were humans and other strange guests here as well. Those with golden skin were likely from the Western Continent. Henry remembered seeing their clothes in a book he'd once read. Were they citizens

of the Sand Nation, known for its magical prowess?

Other diners, who weren't Sand Nation citizens, wore strange clothes that revealed their arms and legs.

I wonder where they hail from? And just where this restaurant is?

Was it possible that the door above the lake wasn't the only such entrance? What if doors all over the world connected to this place?

The young waitress from earlier finally returned with food in hand.

I'm back. Here's your sea bream carpaccio with wasabi mayo. She set his plate of food down gently.

"Wow! Now, this is stunning," Henry blurted out.

The fish on the blindingly white plate was, in a word, beautiful. Its skin was as colorful as a brightly hued flower, its meat was snow-like, and the entire meal looked like flower petals someone had arranged.

The fish's browned skin had a grid-like pattern, a sign that the fish's surface might've been lightly cooked. Green sauce filled the grid pattern. Next to the fish was a round, brown piece of what appeared to be bread and a bowl of brown soup with oranie floating inside.

The soup's aroma made Henry's stomach growl loudly. *Gulp.*

After saying all she had to say, the waitress immediately went to handle another customer. Henry watched her leave and then gazed at the plate sitting in front of him.

The important part is whether it tastes any good.

The carpaccio was so beautifully presented that Henry thought it'd be a waste to take it apart. Nonetheless, he had to know how it tasted. Nervous, he picked up a sparkling-clean fork and stabbed a thin slice of fish.

As the waitress had described, the fish was indeed raw. Only its skin was broiled. Thus, the meat was slightly transparent. That also meant that Henry's fork penetrated it with no resistance, unlike cooked fish.

Henry carefully inspected the fish slice decorated with green sauce. *Fish...*

This was his first time eating fish that hadn't been cooked at all. He was nervous. However, as he put the slice in his mouth, part of him was also excited.

Wow, this is delicious.

Henry was shocked. The carpaccio contained none of the rotten raw flavor he'd heard about. It did indeed have a unique aroma, but it wasn't unpleasant.

This is good stuff.

The carpaccio's mouthfeel was also completely different from cooked fish, making it pleasant to bite into. It wasn't overly tender; instead, it pushed back against Henry's teeth with each bite. Still, it wasn't so tough that he couldn't bite a piece off. He could've done so with no issues if he'd put even a bit of strength into his jaw. And as luck had it, each bite brought forth all manner of savory flavors from the fish.

This sauce is something else, too.

The eggy green sauce was also delectable. It had a slight sourness, making Henry wonder whether it was made by mixing vinegar and egg. Either way, it drew out the fish's savory taste.

As Henry enjoyed the fish's many flavors, he found his nose under siege. *Nngh?!*

It was a sharp sensation, as if hundreds and hundreds of small needles had pierced his nose. Immediately tearing up, he frantically grabbed his glass of water and chugged it.

What the hell's this? Wait—is this the “wasabi” stuff she mentioned?

Wiping his tears away, Henry looked at the plate of food again. That intense stinging feeling had come from the green sauce.

Hrm. The fish meat was delicious, but when he thought about the stinging in his nose...

Henry took another bite. This was his second attempt, so he knew what was coming. Despite that, sharp pain ran through his nose. It was hot. Actually, it just kind of hurt.

Is this sauce really edible? Henry thought. Wait. What if I had some strong

drink to go with it?

The reason the sauce was so spicy was because Henry was just eating it with the fish. If he sipped a drink after each bite, he could relieve that pain immediately. *A fine plan.*

“Excuse me!” He shouted for a waitress and was approached by a young demon girl who seemed good at customer service. “I’d love some alcohol. What do you have?!”

“Yes, of course. Um, we have beer, wine, and sake. White wine and sake go particularly well with carpaccio—er—fish in general! The bartender told me that a while ago!”

“In that case, I’ll take both. Oh, and I’d like another plate of carpaccio. I’ll pay, of course.”

“Right away,” the girl replied with a smile.

The sliced fish was delicious. Henry had to admit that. The wasabi mayo was good as well.

Early in the afternoon, Henry arrived at the beach soaking wet and sighed.

I let my guard down.

Although he hadn’t been totally inebriated, Henry had nonetheless drunk his fair share of otherworldly booze and enjoyed quite a bit of carpaccio. The moment he’d gone through the restaurant’s door, he’d fallen into the lake. He hadn’t anticipated the exit leading to the exact same spot as the entrance.

His water-walking magic had long since expired. Once he’d stepped through the door, Henry had nowhere to go but down.

“Actually, didn’t Father leave me some water-walking shoes?” he whispered to himself.

He could hardly wait for the next seven days to blow by.

Chapter 94:

Chocolate Parfait, Once More

W*hat's wrong with this man?*

Twenty years ago, having survived against the four beasts, and having become the continent's only remaining demon king, Altina stood confused.

"Let me cut to the point. Pledge your loyalty to me and become my servant. I'm sure you don't want to die," said the young man. He was accompanied by a warrior, a mage, and numerous others who looked like priests of some sort.

The young man's bold, proud words enraged Altina's subjects and servants immediately. Her pets rose to their feet, prepared to pounce.

"How dare you speak to her like that, foolish human?!"

"My liege, let us tear them apart here and now!"

"I hope you're ready to die!"

Those surrounding the young man readied themselves for combat.

"You stupid prince! Why the hell are you picking a fight like this?! We're gonna die!"

"Geez. I don't think she's just gonna let us go now."

"Young Lord, please consult me first before doing something so rash."

Altina found herself fascinated by the man's strange attitude. "Stop," she overruled her servants, preventing them from attacking.

Her piercing gaze was enough to terrify not only humans, but demons and monsters as well. They trembled in her presence. Except for this man.

"So? Let's hear what you have to say! Why must I pledge my loyalty to you, human?"

Altina made sure to imbue each and every word with fierce bloodthirstiness. At the same time, she wondered why a weak man was capable of such bravado.

Well, as far as humans went, the young man in front of Altina was likely quite strong. He had a warrior's fit body, and he clearly knew how to use a sword. From the way his party moved to protect their leader, they also seemed experienced.

Nonetheless, they were far too weak to stand against Altina. She'd lived close to three hundred years and wiped the floor with thousands of knights. These humans couldn't compare to the four beasts who'd once defeated Altina's adorable pets and servants, eventually forcing her to prepare for her own death.

"Hm. Let me be clear. The capital was originally mine," the man told her, unfazed by her deadliness. "Twenty years ago, you killed the king who governed this land. And his family, at that. However, you failed to slay them all. There were two survivors—my mother Adelheid and myself. Sadly, my mother passed away when I was young. In other words, I'm the true heir to the throne. As such, I'm the king of this country."

So what? All those truths were meaningless to Altina, which only confused her further. Why should she care about the survivors of a nation her demon folk had destroyed? King or no king, she'd never just hand the city over.

If the young man truly wanted this land, he should've brought an army and used military strength and magic to reconquer it.

"In other words," he said, "as this nation's king, I request that you surrender, return the capital to me, swear allegiance, and become one of my own subjects."

"And you really think I'd do all this?"

Altina didn't mean it as a threat but rather a genuine question. Who would've been stupid enough to agree to those terms? As fate had it, she wasn't the only one who wondered as much.

"Not really, no. That's why I left behind a will." Understanding full well that Altina wouldn't willingly cooperate, the man played his trump card. "'Should I die, I ask that you take revenge. If you succeed, I bequeath this capital and nation to you.' That's what I ordered my people to tell the Kingdom, Duchy, and shrines of the Ancient Six."

“Needless to say, they’re already preparing their armies,” the man continued. “That would be a war for revenge and conquest. No matter how many soldiers they had to sacrifice, they’d do anything to defeat the last demon king. The city would likely burn to the ground.”

“You sly bastard.”

Altina finally realized the man’s intentions. This was a threat. If she killed him, the armies of the Kingdom and Duchy—and the shrine priests, who still loathed demons even now—would come knocking at her door.

“Then why ask me to join you? Why not go to those nations and have them depose me?”

“That’d be no good. All I’d get out of that would be an empty wasteland. A rotting corpse, if you will.” Staring directly at Altina, the man explained why he’d rather join hands with a demon king than his own race. “Demon King Altina, humanity fears your strength. I do not. Instead, I value and respect your knowledge greatly.”

“Before I met you,” he continued, “I wandered through this nation and found myself surprised. The citizens complained about how expensive goods were, how strict the government was, how the colosseum was rigged, how newcomers were too aggressive and how annoying that was. Those were complaints we humans made about countries that operated well enough—countries run by competent leaders.”

Altina understood. She was a demon. Probably the strongest demon on the continent. She was absolutely not an idiot.

“If you pledge loyalty to me, I’ll give you this city,” the man said. “You leading it would be the best choice for all of us. I’d even be happy to lend you a few human civil servants, if you’re open to the idea. I know you’ve wanted aides experienced with paperwork for a while now. Am I wrong?”

If Altina had ruled this nation through sheer power—if it were truly the hell that humans from other countries claimed it was—this man would never have come to her doorstep with this idea.

But as far as he was concerned, there had to be a way out of the situation

besides bloodshed, if Altina held the knowledge and wisdom to govern her country properly.

“Keep in mind that I won’t give you this for free,” the man said. “You’re going to work. I’ll have you give me any strong fighters you have.”

Approximately half of Altina’s country was made up of demons.

“Truth be told, I have lots of enemies,” the man continued. “I’m the rightful heir to the throne, but nobody seems to give a damn. Tons of rebels refuse to serve me. I’ve gotta set them straight. The problem is, my soldiers are weak. They’re fine for carrying food and weapons to the battlefield, or protecting land we’ve conquered, but anything else is impossible for them. They’ve also got important jobs like farming to attend to, so I can’t let them die or get hurt. In short, they’re too weak to face the rebels.”

“That’s when I had a thought,” he concluded. “Maybe I should subjugate the rebels first, since they’re the strongest of the armies, and they can fight without affecting agriculture. They’d be one hell of a fighting force.”

“And that’s where we come in?” Altina asked.

I see, she thought. It was true that most humans, besides knights and mercenaries, didn’t like conflict.

“Well, that’s the gist of it,” the heir to the throne said. “I know that, to us humans, being drafted into a war by someone up top is usually reserved for criminals or slaves, but I imagine that plenty of demon folk would be on board with battling humans. Especially if they could fight without having to ask what they should take and what they shouldn’t.”

Altina smiled instinctively. She and her people welcomed this sort of thing. Twenty years ago, when the beasts had defeated the demon lord, the demon race grew weak. However, they hadn’t lost their fighting spirit. Plenty of fierce demon combatants felt that war was their only way of life.

“As you wish,” said Altina. “I’ll pledge my loyalty or whatever to you.”

“Your Highness?”

She glanced at her stunned underlings and then once again glared daggers at

her new ally.

“But only as a formality,” she added. “I’ll be doing whatever I want. Just ensure that, as my master, you protect this city from foreign invaders, eh? Heh...fear not. As long as you’re fine with bloodthirsty warriors, I’ve got plenty for you.”

She would not be his underling. This was an alliance. Other countries could freely attack the demon king’s nation, but they would require a certain rationale to invade a country ruled by the true king. Altina wasn’t ignorant of that.

The man sighed in relief. “Then we’ve got a deal.”

Things were finally in place. At long last, he was ready to take down the rat-bastard traitors who’d switched sides as soon as they lost to the demons.

He rose to his feet. “Altina! In the name of the one true king, Wilhelm, I recognize you and your line as servants of the Empire. I grant you and your own control over the capital and its surrounding territories. Serve your nation well!”

“As you wish.”

A single nation was born that day.

It was early afternoon in the demon capital. In the office, a young lady was hard at work, surrounded by lush furnishings.

“Then this afternoon’s work is complete, Your Highness. Well done.” The human civil servant took the papers she’d just signed, bowed his head courteously, and left the room.

The young woman, Lastina, watched him leave and then immediately rested back in her office chair. “Your Highness, eh?”

And so, the self-ridicule began.

Lastina was, in fact, a demon—but not just any demon. She was the great Demon King Altina’s only daughter, the head of the Empire’s largest noble family, and the ruler of all demon folk. Or, at least, that was what it said on paper. Lastina didn’t believe that her title suited her.

“It isn’t like I have the power to be called a demon king.”

When Lastina was a small child, she’d dreamed of being able to soar through the air. She’d flapped her tiny wings constantly but had only depressed herself.

Due to the demon lord’s blessings, demons typically paid no thought to bloodlines. The blessings the demon lord granted demon folk were largely random. Even if two parents had powerful blessings, their child wasn’t guaranteed to have the same luck. The opposite often happened as well.

Therefore, the title of “demon king” wasn’t passed down by one’s parents but rather was something one called themselves and forced others to acknowledge. Humanity feared a host of self-proclaimed demon kings.

Unlike Lastina, the Demon King Altina had incredible magical powers and strength, with countless demon followers. However, the demon lord had been unkind to the future Demon King Lastina. She was the weakest demon king ever.

Unusually, Lastina’s blessing had manifested the same way her mother’s had: she’d grown horns, wings, and a tail. The difference was that Lastina was significantly weaker than her mother.

Altina’s exceptional magical power was superior to even the elves’. A single one of her magical attacks was on par with dragon’s breath. Even her basic healing spells far eclipsed a high priest’s. The seven horns on Altina’s head almost looked like a crown.

In comparison, Lastina had but two horns to call her own. On top of that, she had to lift her hair to show them. Her magical powers were only slightly superior to those of an average human mage.

Altina’s tail was as long as she was tall and could reportedly cut through steel with one whip-like attack. Lastina’s tail, on the other hand, only reached her knees. However hard she wagged it, she only ever resembled a small child throwing a tantrum.

Altina had massive wings that allowed her to soar over battlefields. Lastina’s wings were smaller than a bat’s. No matter how hard she flapped them, they served as nothing more than weak fans. She couldn’t fly.

Even if Lastina learned to wield magic, fight, and subjugate other demons directly from her mother, the reality was that countless demons were stronger than her. Take Lionel, the fierce, undefeated warrior of the colosseum, who was strong enough to call himself a demon king.

Of all the demons who called themselves by that title, it was clear that Lastina was weakest. That was why she'd been nicknamed the Weakest King. Of course, nobody dared say that to her directly, but she was known as such throughout the capital.

Thinking about it any further would just be painful, so Lastina switched gears. "I suppose I should head back and train a little."

Three years had passed since she'd inherited the title of demon king. She'd finally gotten used to paperwork, but her strength hadn't grown in the least.

In fact, she was so busy with desk work that she didn't have time to train as often as she liked, so her actual skills had probably declined. How could she possibly call herself a demon king?

That was why Lastina secretly decided to discover the truth about that strange door's existence.

"I'm heading to my room, Fal. I don't need help getting changed," she informed the maid in the corner, standing up.

The maid in question had medusa eyes capable of stopping any intruder in their tracks, so she also served as a bodyguard of sorts. "Understood, Your Highness."

Of course, Lastina had no way of knowing what fateful meetings and reunions awaited her.

It truly was strange.

"'Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World.' What the heck's this thing?"

The sign on the polished door was written in letters from the Eastern Continent, and there was a cat plaque on its front. For some reason, the door had randomly appeared out of nowhere in Lastina's dressing room that

morning.

I heard that the ancient elves had special teleportation magic. Is this an example of that?

Belonging to the continent's greatest noble family allowed Lastina to gather information quickly and effectively. Through those avenues, she'd learned of the legendary teleportation magic that the mage Altorius, one of the four heroes—"beasts"—had resurrected.

Lastina had also heard that a student of Altorius's had learned that magic directly from him and mastered it. That student could travel across the Eastern Continent in a single instant.

But then, why here in the demon capital?

Why had the door appeared in Lastina's dressing room, and why did its sign say it led to a restaurant? It didn't make any sense.

"Well, sitting here thinking about it isn't going to give me answers." That meant she had one option.

Lastina made up her mind and opened the door. The sound of bells ringing filled the air, and she stepped into a strangely well-lit room that was exactly like the door's sign described. It was full of the hustle and bustle one expected at midday.

This looks like one of the taverns in the city.

Lastina quickly took in her surroundings and saw humans, elves, half-elves, dwarves, halflings, and even demons and monsters.

The collection of races, all eating and drinking their fill, seemed unlinked to one another. In fact, a number of races would normally have been at each other's throats if they'd met elsewhere, yet they showed no signs of hostility in the restaurant.

The whole thing reminded Lastina of the time her mother had taken her to a tavern in the city where demon folk gathered. Thanks to her specific blessing, Altina's outward appearance was rather limiting in some ways.

But I've never heard of a place like this in the demon capital.

Not only were demons present but monsters as well. Lastina didn't know of a tavern like this. If one did exist, there was no way that the demon king wouldn't have been aware of it.

As she attempted to dig a little deeper, Lastina heard a very unique and familiar voice address her.

"Um...Lady Lastina, is it really you?"

"Princess Adelheid...? Why are you here?!"

Standing before Lastina was her master's beloved daughter, Adelheid.

Lastina had only ever met the princess twice in her life. The first time, when she'd been much younger, was at the emperor's coronation ceremony. She recalled greeting Adelheid and playing with her. The second time Lastina had met the princess was when she'd visited the imperial capital to inform them of her inauguration as the new demon king.

Still, she could never mistake Princess Adelheid for someone else. The young woman was even more beautiful than in Lastina's memories, and her surprised face was very familiar.

"I haven't seen you since I became the demon—er, inherited my title. I heard that you were being treated for an illness." Indeed, shortly after becoming demon king, Lastina learned that Princess Adelheid had been afflicted with the "peasant killer" and sent to the outer palace.

So, how come she was present on the other side of that suspicious door? Lastina couldn't wrap her head around it all. "Why are you here?"

"To eat a parfait, of course! It's all thanks to Grandfather."

Adelheid's response immediately jogged Lastina's memory. *That's right. The princess has always been like this.*

Although Lastina had only met her twice, she knew all too well that Adelheid could be a bit of a ditz, largely unaware of the way the world worked. She cared little about the demons' past, or how others viewed them.

Even in the Empire, where demons and humans coexisted, Lastina had found that humans often distanced themselves from her. Even her fellow demon folk

did that. In that regard, she found Adelheid's approach very warm.

"Would you care to join me?" Adelheid asked. "Lord Shareef and Lady Renner aren't here today, so I was feeling rather lonely."

Shareef and Renner... Could she be referring to the prince and princess from the Western Continent?

If memory served Lastina correctly, the Empire had recently engaged in friendly relations with a desert nation on the Western Continent. The royal family there bore the same names Adelheid had just mentioned.

Lastina sat on a soft chair the princess recommended. As soon as the demon king sat down, a waitress holding another customer's food called out to her. Judging by the waitress's goat horns, she was also a demon.

"Welcome! This is your first time here, right? Are you a friend of Adelheid's?"

"Oh...yes."

Lastina was actually slightly relieved to have bumped into a demon in this mysterious restaurant. After taking a longer look at the girl, she noticed that—although her blessing was very weak—she was clean and quite beautiful. Lastina guessed that she probably belonged to some affluent family in the Empire.

If she was a waitress in this bizarre establishment, maybe the demon girl could give Lastina the details she so desired. "Um, what is this place?"

"This is an otherworldly restaurant! We serve all kinds of food here, and it's all delicious!" answered the girl somewhat proudly.

"F-food? I suppose it did say as much on the door."

Indeed, the door sign had read "Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World." This place was, in fact, exactly that.

"Since you're here and all, would you like to grab a bite?" asked the waitress, smiling brightly. "Most first-time customers don't have money on them, so we usually just put it on their tab!"

"That sounds lovely! Since you're here in the Restaurant to Another World already, would you care for a parfait, Lady Lastina?" Adelheid followed up with

a recommendation.

“Er...I suppose it couldn’t hurt.” It would’ve been rude to say no at this point, so Lastina nodded.

“Excellent. In that case...” Adelheid searched her distant memory and recalled the month she’d spent playing with her old friend. “If I remember correctly, you don’t like fruit, do you?”

Lastina wasn’t particularly fond of fruits *or* vegetables. At one banquet she and her mother had been invited to, Lastina had primarily eaten meat, avoiding dishes made from fruits and vegetables harvested around the Empire.

Adelheid also remembered Lastina’s mother. She and Lastina shared similar facial features, but Altina had a much larger tail and wings. Adelheid also recalled that, unlike her daughter, Altina seemed to prefer fruit and vegetable dishes to meat.

“Yes...I like sweets, but I’m not really big on fruits,” Lastina answered, somewhat embarrassed. Even now, she had trouble eating fruit; as an adult, she did so simply for nutritional reasons.

Lastina remembered how, when she was still a child, her mother had once abandoned her desk work, fled the castle, and tried to force Lastina to eat a ripe fruit she’d gotten somewhere. What was once a dark memory was now incredibly nostalgic for the demon king.

“In that case, how did you enjoy the cafa?” Adelheid asked. “Lord Shareef told me that he sent some to you and that you were quite fond of it.”

The black tea from the Western Continent had recently become available in the Empire and had begun to do the rounds in the demon capital about a year ago.

“Cafa? Yes, yes. I quite enjoy a cup of cafa,” Lastina nodded. “It’s unfortunate that it’s so hard to get, but myself and many of the capital’s citizens are fond of it.”

A cup of rich cafa with lots of high-quality sugar was the perfect sweet drink to accompany her paperwork. It relieved Lastina’s exhaustion and helped her stay on top of things. Nowadays, she made a point of keeping enough cafa

stocked so that she didn't run out.

Hearing her friend talk about the virtues of cafa, Adelheid decided what to order for her. "That's perfect, then."

The other world had so many sweets and pastries, one had to take extra care when making a recommendation. That was something Adelheid had heard from a long-eared noble mage from the Duchy who sometimes sat with her in the restaurant.

Calling out to Aletta, who just happened to be passing by, Adelheid made an additional order. "Aletta, she'll have a mocha-chocolate parfait. Could you bring it out with my chocolate parfait, please?"

"Absolutely! It'll take a few minutes to bring them both together. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Thank you so much," Adelheid said to Aletta and then told Lastina, "Now, all we have to do is wait. Actually, how did you get here, Lady Lastina?"

"Huh? Well, a strange door appeared in the palace."

"Oh, my! How lucky!"

"Excuse me?" As usual, Lastina had trouble keeping up with Adelheid. She waited for the princess's next words.

"The doors leading to this restaurant can be quite whimsical, you see," Adelheid explained. "Where a new one will appear is anyone's guess. Or so I've heard, anyway. Grandfather actually went and built a palace over a spot where a door appeared, so it shows up in the same place every time."

"Really?"

Now that Adelheid mentioned it, Lastina recalled that the late Wilhelm had constructed a palace outside the capital to spend his final days in. The doors weren't anything to be feared, judging by the princess's words. That much was clear when she looked at Adelheid.

With that matter settled, Lastina finally loosened up a bit. "I guess, in that case, I won't have to take action."

“Indeed! I’m so happy that I got to see you again after all these years.”

“Likewise.” Lastina couldn’t help smiling warmly at Adelheid’s own glowing expression.

“You finally smiled! Thank goodness.”

“Huh?”

“Since you stepped in here, not only have you been on guard but also it’s seemed as though something’s nagging at you. What happened, Lady Lastina? We have some time before our parfaits arrive. Would you care to talk about it? I don’t get to chat much about such things at the palace where I’m staying.”

Adelheid went quiet and stared at Lastina. As if lured by Adelheid’s gaze, Lastina began to come clean about concerns she knew other demons had about her. That was something she would never, ever have done in the palace at home.

“The truth is...I don’t know what to do. Am I really fit to be the demon king? Should I pass my position on to another more capable demon?”

“Is that so?” asked Adelheid. “You know, my father once said that he thought you becoming the new demon king was a very dependable thing.”

“The emperor said that?”

Adelheid’s reaction was not what Lastina had expected. Emperor Wolfgang, the nation’s second-generation ruler... Despite being fairly distant in age from the emperor, Lastina had always felt a kind of kinship with him. They both had legendary parents.

And yet he’d complimented her? She couldn’t fathom why.

“Yes,” Adelheid continued. “That wasn’t long after you took the position. When your mother first brought you to see him, he felt that you were smart and wise beyond your years, and that didn’t change in the years after. He said that he felt that you would be the perfect leader to rule the demon city.”

“Wise, huh?” Lastina couldn’t help but sigh.

She was, in fact, smarter than most. She was a fast learner, a top-level negotiator, and had conquered paperwork with ease. When she was younger,

as the next in line to the throne, she'd even helped Altina plan invasions and govern.

Since becoming demon king, Lastina had focused more on economic negotiations with the humans, raising both tax revenue and population a little bit. Before Altina succumbed to the inevitability that was death, she'd told Lastina that she felt at ease leaving the demon capital to her.

"Unfortunately, those around me say that I'm too weak a demon king," she explained to Adelheid.

Ultimately, Lastina's talents weren't enough to cover the fatal weakness she'd held since birth. She couldn't help but wonder if a demon granted such a weak, pathetic blessing by the demon lord was worthy of being called a demon king.

"Oh...is there something wrong with being weak?" Adelheid asked.

"Excuse me?" Adelheid's words surprised Lastina. What was she saying?

The princess continued. It was unclear whether she realized that the demon king was stunned. Her answer was clear and focused.

"I have close to no skill in battle. I can barely use a knife, never mind a sword. I know no magic. Nevertheless, I'm still the imperial princess. Father only knows the basics of swordsmanship, but he's still the emperor. I think it's wonderful to be strong, like Lord Shareef is, but if one asked me whether I think physical strength is a necessity...I'm not sure it is."

"You really believe that?" Lastina asked.

It wasn't as if she didn't understand where Adelheid was coming from. As a ruler, she knew a fair bit about the humans' world.

Most human kings were far from strong; that was common sense. But Lastina wasn't human. She was a demon. Was she allowed to be weak?

"I don't know," Adelheid replied. "But let me ask you this—if you're weak, wouldn't it be fine simply not to step onto a battlefield? Grandfather once told me something: 'Leave war to the strong. It's the job of those who stand on top to prepare, so that the warriors can fight their best. Once a commander is forced to step onto the field themselves, the battle's already lost.'"

Adelheid didn't really understand what any of that meant, but she did know that her grandfather—the greatest, most respected man in all the Empire—hadn't valued physical strength much. She seemed to recall him saying something about how the one who best manipulated soldiers on a battlefield won, regardless of whether they were personally weak.

“He also said something else,” she added. “‘Bringing honor to your country is a very difficult thing—even more difficult than victory in war. A king who can do so should be valued.’”

“He...said that?”

Adelheid's words dug deep into Lastina. They were the words of a human who didn't value strength above all else. Lastina, who'd been born without a blessing, would rather accept those words than cry over her circumstances.

That's why she eventually nodded her head and smiled. “I suppose he's right.”

“Oh, thank goodness! You've smiled again,” Adelheid responded with a grin of her own.

This was the Restaurant to Another World. If Lastina and Adelheid were going to eat parfaits, they should do so with smiles on their faces. Adelheid had learned that through her time coming to the restaurant.

“Sorry for the wait! Here are your parfaits!”

The pair's orders arrived as they smiled at one another, and so their quiet little tea party began in earnest.

Now then...hmm. It's black and brown.

That was Lastina's first impression of the parfait, a treat she'd never seen in her life.

It's presented quite carefully, but...is it burnt?

She frowned suspiciously at the dish as she examined the beautiful arrangement, the unknown ingredients nearly spilling out of the glass.

The parfait itself comprised multiple layers, making it clear that a master patissier had put the dish together.

All sorts of colorful fruit, centered around some kind of white stuff, decorated the parfait in front of Adelheid. Although Lastina couldn't vouch for the parfait's taste, it was easy to see how one might look at it as a piece of art.

Lastina's parfait was somewhat different, however. It was primarily composed of blacks, whites, and browns. Quite frankly, it didn't look very good.

At the bottom of the glass was some sort of black slime. Atop that was a brown-colored something-or-other, and above that was moist, black stuff. A bunch of crumbled-up brown things were layered on top of that.

However, the tower didn't end there. Above the crumbled bits was some white-and-brown stuff topped with a soft-looking white layer, not unlike Adelheid's parfait. Above the white layer rested some kind of black stuff—lots of it.

At the tower's very top was some sort of round pastry. It wasn't light brown; it looked kind of burnt.

Beautifully browned, leaf-shaped treats sprinkled with sugar decorated the sides of the glass. This clearly wasn't a failed dish, but rather, what the parfait was supposed to look like. Nonetheless, it required a measure of courage to eat.

"Come, come! Dig in! This parfait is my personal favorite, but that one's delicious too! I'm sure you'll love it." Adelheid began to joyously devour her dessert.



I suppose this is another world. It shouldn't be that surprising that something like this parfait could be tasty.

Making her peace with her order, Lastina decided to take a bite. First, she picked up one of the normal-looking baked treats decorating the sides of the glass.

Oh! This is delightful. It's not particularly sweet, and it's light to the bite.

The baked treat was decidedly savory, despite the sugar spread on its surface. Maybe the baker hadn't used much for the inside? Its mouthfeel was light and crispy as well, almost as if the treat were made of multiple baked layers.

It tasted of wheat and butter, and as it fell apart in Lastina's mouth, it quickly dissolved and vanished.

The baked good's quality significantly raised Lastina's expectations. She turned her attention to the round, burnt brown object sitting at the dessert's very top, carefully placed above the pretty-looking white stuff.

Next up...

Lastina had no idea what the round object could be, but she assumed that it, too, was some treat or pastry. She used her silver spoon to scoop it up along with some of the surrounding white stuff and then took a bite.

Mmm...is this white stuff some sort of milk-based food? It's a little sweet and —huh?!

As she thought about how tasty the mouthful was, the brown object in her mouth began to melt, throwing her into confusion.

It's bitter! Wait, no! It's sweet?!

In fact, it was both. As far as Lastina knew, however, there was no such thing as a bitter pastry. Sweets were, well, sweet! Still, the thing that her tongue's heat was melting most certainly had a sweetness *and* bitterness.

I get it! That's why Princess Adelheid asked me about cafa.

Cafa by itself was sour and bitter. After adding sugar and letting it dissolve, though, it became bittersweet. Sugared cafa was a terribly delicious drink, in

fact.

This brown confection in particular reminded her of cafa and was more delicious than its outward appearance implied. Lastina immediately scooped up the remaining two pieces with her spoon and ate them.

Hmm. This black stuff scattered across the white cream's surface must be made by melting that bittersweet confection from before, Lastina thought. The fact that both ingredients were the same color lent credence to her conclusion.

Together, the soft white cream and extremely bittersweet black treat created a portal to another world of deliciousness.

As she continued digging through the tower, its flavor suddenly changed. Now, Lastina encountered a layer a bit harder than the cream.

Oh—next is something cold.

It was some sort of chilly brown food and wasn't completely different from the earlier flavors.

It's bittersweet, but something's different about the bitterness. Hmm...? I've tasted this before.

Deep inside the sugary milk flavor, Lastina sensed some kind of bitterness pulling out the dish's overall sweetness. However, it was entirely different from the bitterness she'd experienced biting into the round treat earlier.

This new flavor was familiar to Lastina, making her trace her memories. *I've tasted this recently before coming here.*

Even while she thought, Lastina's spoon didn't stop. This time, she directed her utensil at some kind of baked good. It wasn't particularly sweet and wasn't all that tasty by itself.

As it soaked in the melted cream stuff, however, it became surprisingly good. Its crunchy texture and fragrance were both missing from the various ingredients atop the glass—well, besides the leaf-shaped baked goods, anyway.

As Lastina enjoyed this unique mouthfeel, the next delight came into sight. It was a moist, brown-black something or other.

At first glance, it didn't look at all tasty. At this point, though, Lastina was

more than aware that everything in the parfait glass was delicious. So she didn't hesitate for a moment. The cake was shockingly soft and soaked with... something.

The moment she put it into her mouth, Lastina immediately understood what the taste she'd recognized before had been. *I get it now! This is cafa!*

It was the flavor of cafa full of lots of dissolved sugar. The delightful treat was almost like a water-drenched cloth. The cake was so soft that she didn't even have to bite into it to taste the cafa's rich flavor flowing across her tongue.

That means this must be some sort of cafa confection with milk.

Lastina wasn't sure how the strong cafa-and-milk flavor was made. It was hard, gradually popping and melting, and had a very gentle taste altogether different from the cake up top, which tasted of rich cafa.

If she changed the balance of a bite, she actually experienced something slightly different in terms of flavor. It wasn't long before all the layers disappeared into Lastina's stomach.

Last but not least... Ahh. This must be some sort of hardened cafa.

The remaining slime-like black stuff on the bottom of the glass tasted like frozen cafa.

Like the cake above, it wasn't particularly sweet or delicious by itself. However, the melted remnants of everything else in the glass had soaked into the black cafa, filling it with all sorts of sweetness. The strange, jiggly texture combined with the taste of milk for a completely new flavor profile.

Lastina devoured everything there was to devour in her mocha-chocolate parfait, sighed deeply, and set her spoon down.

As luck had it, Adelheid had just finished her parfait as well. The princess put down her spoon, and the two women made eye contact and smiled. It was clear that they'd both greatly enjoyed their desserts.

"Is it all right if I join you again?" Lastina asked frankly.

"Oh, but of course!" Adelheid nodded, responding as if it were the least

complicated thing in the world. “I’ll wait for you here. Next time, I’ll have to introduce you to Lady Victoria, Lady Renner, and of course, Lord Shareef!”

“I’m so glad I found this place,” Lastina whispered to herself. She unconsciously wagged her tail and flapped her wings as she watched Adelheid order two cups of hot cafa.

A wonderful conversation with wonderful company and wonderful food—she would never forget this day for the rest of her life.

It was a while yet before the young woman proudly declared herself “Lastina, the Weakest King.”

Chapter 95:

Agedashi Tofu

Underneath the ever-blue sky, the boat drifted across the ocean.

On the deck, which shifted to and fro, Alice dug in her heels and stood. In her hand was a large staff made from an ancient tree. A complex pattern was carved into the magic staff, which Alice's master had made especially for her. She gripped it tightly and began awkwardly chanting one of the "spells" her master had taught her.

"Go!" She fired the spell with gusto.

A glowing arrow of light erupted from the end of Alice's staff and smacked into the open sea. Alice had been taught never to aim her magic at a living creature while practicing, so she took great care to avoid doing so.

To grow familiar with using—and eventually mastering—magic, Alice had been given a bit of homework. Firing magic arrows was part of that. When Alice's master had been as young as Alice was, her parents had taught her in the same way. She'd apparently fired magic arrows at stones and such.

After repeating this attack against the ocean three times, Alice sat back down, exhausted. "I'm bored."

Caring little about dirtying her clothes, she let herself sit on the ship deck and stared at the endlessly blue sky. About half a month had passed since she and her master had begun their journey across the ocean. Alice was terribly bored of it all.

"Give me something to dooooo."

Before Alice and her master had boarded the ship, some straight-eared people had told them that the journey would be perilous. Sometimes, there were huge rainstorms. It was even possible that a sea monster would attack them.

If anyone fell into the ocean during a catastrophe like either of those, they'd

be doomed. Heck, lots of ships sank to the ocean floor before ever reaching their intended destination. However large the ship, one poor encounter with a massive storm or giant monster was all it took.

Alice had been terrified when she'd heard all that, and even her master had ended up changing her plans. Deciding to stay in town for a bit, she'd headed deep into the nearby woods, cut a branch off a tree, and ultimately turned it into a staff that made it easier for Alice to wield magic in self-defense. Then Alice's master had bought and made all kinds of potions, cast magic on her bow and arrows, and prepared in advance for crossing the ocean.

Since that fateful day when Alice's master had found her abandoned in the woods, Alice had learned so many things.

The reason the trip had been so smooth up until now was likely the amulet that the friendly witch lady in the seaside town had given them. It was made of a stone and a shell that she'd found deep within the ocean.

I doubt that any of the ocean god's followers would be foolish enough to attack you with one of these. It even has the power to keep storms away. Still, be careful.

Alice recalled the surprised expression on her master's face when the witch lady had given her the amulet. The young girl didn't know the details, but she could just barely tell that the amulet was full of strong magical power.

And so, her first journey by ship had gone swimmingly. Too swimmingly, in fact. Alice wasn't sure whether it was because of her amulet, but nothing bad had happened. She simply sat on the ship as it swayed to and fro endlessly, bored out of her mind. That had to be a good thing, right?

After sitting on the deck for a while, Alice sighed and stood up. "Guess I'll go back!"

Her master, the elf mage Fardania, was currently holed up in her room. Fardania figured that, if she had all this free time, she might as well use it to complete some of the magical research she'd been doing. She was jotting down all kinds of things on paper, casting magic, and generally staying too busy to keep Alice company.

“Master’s new magic... Didn’t she say she was gonna finish today?”

Alice thought back on what she and Fardania had spoken of that morning. Her master desperately wanted to finish her work today, so she’d told the young girl to give her some time alone in their cabin.

“I wonder if she’s done.” Alice looked up at the sky. The sun was starting to look as though it was setting.

What sort of magic was her master working on? The young girl desperately hoped it would rid her of her boredom. With that thought in mind, Alice headed below deck to the small, dark cabin she shared with her master.

“Yes! It’s done!” Fardania exclaimed.

Just as Alice arrived at the windowless room lit by her master’s magic, Fardania had completed her research. “Ah, Alice! Perfect timing. I’m all done. Brand new magic!”

“Um...um...congratulations?”

Alice wasn’t sure how to reply to her master, who was usually the epitome of calm and cool. Nonetheless, she offered her words of congratulations.

Alice’s response put a smile on Fardania’s face. “Thanks! It took a wee bit more time than I expected, but, eh, easy as pie for someone like me!”

The elf had first begun work on this magic over half a year ago. There was no way that a human or half-elf mage could do something that Fardania couldn’t, and that thought had driven her to start her research.

Now, after all that time, her hard work had paid off. Of course, she was on cloud nine.

“Wow.” Seeing her master so excited was enough to pique Alice’s curiosity. “What kinda magic is it?”

“A type of summoning magic. Using a spell, I alter the flow of magical power and call forth something from a faraway place or another dimension that fits certain requirements. Basically, it’s magic that lets me bring stuff I want to myself directly.”

Fardania explained her new magic in the simplest terms to the fascinated

young girl.

“Woow. So, are you gonna summon something now?”

“But of course!” Fardania nodded. “That’s why I spent all night trying to finish up!” On the floor of the cabin was a magic circle that she’d drawn without permission. She began to pour her magical energy into it, chanting.

The knowledge Fardania had gained over the course of a hundred years, the new knowledge she’d acquired during her short-but-wonderful journey—this was magic born of the techniques she’d picked up on her travels, born of Fardania’s entire being. However much the ship rocked back and forth atop the waves, that truth couldn’t be moved.

Eventually, Fardania picked up on a nostalgic presence through the magic circle—the familiar feel of the forest where she’d spent most of her life. Amid the trees was the single object that had inspired her to begin her journey.

All right! She drew it close to her and summoned it. “Come to me, door!”

Fardania completed the spell, and the desired object stood in the magic circle.

Seeing the familiar entranceway in the room, Alice gasped. “Wait—is this the door to Nekoya?”

Since the morning following her fateful encounter with her master, she’d passed through that door with a cat illustration numerous times.

“That’s right! If I hadn’t finished the spell today, we’d have had to wait another seven days. I worked really hard to make it in time!” Satisfied that her magic had succeeded, Fardania gulped. “Now then, shall we?”

“Yay!” Alice replied, a big smile on her face.

Within the narrow cabin on the ship, the sound of bells rang out.

It’d been nearly a month since Alice and Fardania had set foot onto solid ground. Both let out sighs of relief. They’d avoided being attacked by monsters or swept up into storms. Still, for an elf, there was something terribly comforting about standing on solid ground. That served as a firm reminder to Fardania that elves just weren’t meant to be on the open sea.

And so, she made an order that she normally wouldn’t have.

“They don’t care how long it takes—they just want to drink miso soup?”

The master couldn’t help repeating Aletta’s words back to her in surprise. Miso soup came with nearly every meal set on the menu. Aside from the special pork version served on Meat Day, nobody had ever specifically ordered miso soup by itself before.

“Yeah. The pair over there.”

“Ah. I get it now.”

Once the master confirmed that the two guests were regulars—the sisters who’d recently begun to drop by together—he immediately caught on to what they wanted.

He’d heard in the past that there was a race of pointy-eared beings who never aged and hated food made from animals. Now that he thought about it, the master realized that none of his pointy-eared guests had aged in years. He remembered the blonde-haired girl in particular because she’d ordered a meal with no meat, fish, milk, or eggs on her very first visit.

Since Nekoya’s miso soup used bonito stock, its scent alone made it no good to serve to them.

“Well, if they really want miso soup, I suppose I could make some using kelp stock. But, you know what...it’d be a waste not to cook a meal to go with it. They’re basically leaving it up to me anyway!”

“What’re you going to make?” Aletta asked.

“I’m gonna serve them a new dish I thought up not too long ago.”

The master peered into the large fridge. After thinking for a bit, he pulled out the firm silky tofu. *When it comes to texture, silky tofu goes best with miso soup.*

He cut a big chunk off the tofu and wrapped it in a dishcloth, placing a dish on top of it. “Now then, I suppose I’ll get to the miso soup.”

It would take a bit of time for the tofu to drain. Meanwhile, the master checked other customers’ orders, filled a small pot with water for the sauce,

and started making miso soup without bonito.

Fardania and Alice were taking in the sights. It'd been quite some time since their last visit, after all. It would be a while before their food came out, due to their order. However, the fruity ice water was far more thirst-quenching than the old, bad-smelling water on the ship.

The sound of customers happily chatting filled their long ears—not the sound of endless waves, the ship creaking, or the snores of other travelers with too much free time on their hands.

Among the guests was Fardania's friend, happily enjoying a plate of rice and natto spaghetti. The witch Fardania had met in town—likely not human—was also present.

Fardania was relieved. *I'm glad they're both doing well.*

Since departing on their journey to cross the ocean, Fardania and Alice had had no idea what was happening on the mainland, besides brief island stops to restock. As far as the mage could tell, little had changed.

Eventually, a demon waitress came out with food in hand. "Sorry for the wait! Here's your agedashi tofu!"

"Thank you." Upon getting a whiff of the dish's aroma, Fardania instinctively expressed her gratitude.

She glanced at the meal in the deep bowl. During her time in the other world, she'd developed a habit of staring at her meals and trying to figure them out.

Steam rose off the brown miso soup and white rice. Off to the side were some yellow pickles. The main course—a somewhat sweet-smelling yellow square drenched in dark brown sauce—sat in the center of the dish. On top of this square were some dark green vegetables and a light yellow something or other.

I'm guessing that this is a tofu dish. The tofu's color and overall look were different than usual, but since the dish's name had "tofu" in it, Fardania was sure she was right.

It's yellow...which means he fried it in oil.

There were lots of oil-fried food in the port town. Fardania also saw fried food

fairly often at the Restaurant to Another World.

The sauce's sweet aroma, along with the faint scent of something fried in high-quality oil, was enough to whet her appetite.

Meanwhile, Alice was already digging in, her cheeks nice and full. "Hey, this is really tasty! It's kinda spicy, though!"

Since beginning her new life, the young girl had accompanied her master to Nekoya many times, and the food was delicious every time. Thus, Alice had no reservations about digging into any and every new dish the restaurant presented to her.

As usual, she was immediately pleased by how tasty this new meal was.

"Then I suppose I'll have to dig in, too." Fardania grinned at Alice and looked at the dish.

First, let's figure out what this is.

The elf carefully cut a piece without sauce. Her silver knife sliced through the block's golden-yellow crust smoothly, revealing the dish's white insides.

Fardania stabbed the slice with her fork and took a bite. *Yeah, definitely tofu.*

Her expectations weren't betrayed, but in a strange way, she was still surprised.

The slightly sweet flavor, reminiscent of elf beans, was in fact tofu; its aromatic crust had been fried in oil. All of that was as Fardania expected.

The crust was thin, and had a different flavor than the tofu beneath it. Its savory taste added something extra to the tofu's light flavor. Fardania had assumed that the tofu's crust was likely coated with some kind of fried flour.

But it's firmer than usual. No, it's hard. She rolled the piece around her mouth with her tongue, taking great care to taste it slowly.

The surface of the tofu was tougher than tofu steak. That said, "tough" tofu was still extremely tender compared to most foods. In this case, however, the tofu was so tough that it didn't fall apart when Fardania bit it.

Furthermore, its flavor was stronger; the aromatic taste of elf beans spread

through Fardania's mouth.

What's up with this?

Fardania often found herself lost as to how a dish in the other world was cooked, even if she understood its ingredients. She raised her head and noticed Alice looking at her, befuddled.

"Um...um...do you like it?"

"I do. I do." Fardania chuckled.

She understood why the younger girl would be confused. After all, she'd taken a single bite and then worn a conflicted expression on her face.

This time, Fardania cut a big piece of tofu with sauce and put it into her mouth. Tasting the dish once more, she couldn't help but offer her impressions. "Ah! This is delicious."

The taste of rich oil in the tofu's fried crust fused the firm, white tofu's rich flavor and the sweet, salty glaze of soy sauce, sugar, and even alcohol. The handful of somewhat-spicy yellow roots and dark green sliced vegetables on top brought out the dish's flavor further.

"Right?!" Alice's face sparkled as she listened to Fardania.

Slightly overwhelmed by Alice's childish smile, Fardania turned her attention to the soup. "Let's try some of this as well. It was our main objective, after all."

The palm-sized bowl of brown miso soup was ever so slightly different from what the master had served to other customers. Square pieces of carefully cut tofu and green ocean weeds floated in the liquid.

Fardania glanced at the soup other customers were drinking; it appeared largely the same, but the scent was different. The very faint aroma that, as an elf, usually turned her off from miso soup was gone. All she smelled was miso.

Fardania used her spoon to scoop up some soup and took a sip.

Aaah!

Her first taste of the otherworldly restaurant's miso soup was as delicious as she expected. The seaweed had melded with the soup, adding a saltiness that

her tongue absorbed. The ocean weeds themselves absorbed the miso's savory flavor and had their own unique mouthfeel, while the square bits of soft tofu fell apart quickly.

This wasn't the usual soup for humans, which had some sort of minor fish ingredient mixed in. Fardania wished the seaweed soup was the standard miso soup that the master served at Nekoya; it really was that delicious.

Watching Fardania drink the soup, Alice decided to try some for herself.

"Whooooa!" She found the liquid far too hot, making her ears tremble in surprise.

It didn't take the young girl long to try again. A silver spoon in hand, she soon devoured her miso soup. Fardania could tell that Alice was also quite fond of the seaweed broth, and for some reason, she found herself oddly satisfied by the girl's reaction.

The elf placed a few pickles atop her rice and took a bite. The salty vegetables and sweet white rice restored her miso-soaked tongue to normal, and soon, she turned her attention back to the agedashi tofu.

Now then.

When it came to the Restaurant to Another World, Fardania was a veteran. She knew well that the taste of the restaurant's dishes tended to evolve after some time passed. In exchange for losing its rich aroma fresh out of the kitchen, a dish often gained a new flavor, or became slightly more tender. That allowed any given dish to be enjoyed in a novel way.

Judging by its appearance, agedashi tofu was one such dish. After Fardania took a single bite, that much was made clear to her.

Mmm. I knew it.

The sauce had soaked into the tofu's crisp surface, revealing a brand-new persona. The tofu no longer smelled of high-quality oil. Its sauce-soaked crust had softened and tasted sweet instead. That cloying taste enwrapped the tofu's flavor.

It's actually too rich by itself. Fardania took a bite of rice. Its taste fused with

the main dish's heaviness, bringing out its savory flavor even further.

Yeah, this is the stuff.

Satisfied with the rice and tofu, Fardania continued to dig in until she noticed a pair of eyes on her.

Alice was looking at her jealously. There was no longer any agedashi tofu left on the young girl's plate.

Fardania grinned and gave Alice half of her portion.

Chapter 96:

Coffee Float, Once More

The cloudless blue sky above, the sun's burning-hot light, the endless golden desert stretching beyond the horizon. After seeing it all, Shareef finally felt at home again.

How mysterious. I never thought I'd find myself longing for these sights.

Shareef narrowed his eyes as the sun glared down upon him, instantly reminding him of how powerful it truly was.

The Sand Nation's citizens often felt that the sun's light was far too powerful, since it existed simply to illuminate the heavens, and that the desert was too vast for humans to live upon. As both a citizen of that nation, and the man who would one day rule it, Shareef felt that way, too; if only the sun and desert didn't exist.

Nonetheless, after being away for over half a year, Shareef discovered that those things had become oddly nostalgic.



What a long, long journey that was.

Shareef didn't regret getting his father's permission to accomplish his goal. However, as one who'd never left his country, his trip was full of struggles. He and his bodyguards had sailed across the open seas, surrounded by nothing but salt water, and encountering storms that nearly sank them to the bottom of the ocean.

They were even attacked by monsters, forcing Shareef himself to draw his sword and command his few bodyguards to help him ward them off. Once, in the Empire, he and his guards had ridden across open plains that were freezing cold, even during the day.

Ultimately, however, a prince like Shareef couldn't have had those vital experiences if he hadn't left his country. More importantly, when he thought of this trip as a quest for *her*, he was able to deal with the many struggles as they came.

At the end of Shareef's long journey, he and his crew found themselves in the Empire's capital. Both the buildings and the roads themselves were made of stone, and Shareef found himself surprised by the demons living normally out in the open. The Empire overflowed with a different culture from his own, and he treasured the days he spent there.

Arriving back home, however, Shareef realized something. He actually wanted to return to the Sand Nation that he'd grown so used to.

I see now. This is what it means to have a homeland. I'm sure Adelheid must feel the same way... To her, the Empire is her home.

That was something Shareef had never thought about prior to his journey and was precisely why he knew the path that he and his father had decided upon wasn't the wrong one.

A gift to form bonds with the Empire. Surely it would come of use.

As Shareef pondered, a man stepped up behind him. "So, this is the Sand Nation, eh?" His accent was different from Shareef's.

Shareef turned around. “Yes. This is my homeland,” he said.

Unlike the Sand Nation’s citizens, the man had white skin. A squad of demons surrounded him. He looked to be in the prime of his life; he was fit as a fiddle, and the sunlight reflected off his glimmering golden armor.

The desert’s heat was enough to turn armor like that into a frying pan almost instantly, burning whoever wore it to death. Yet the man in front of Shareef looked as cool as could be.

The bodyguards around him already seemed ready to fall on their faces, despite being equipped only with leather armor and bits of cloth. That made the man a total outlier.

The strange sight reminded Shareef of just who the man before him was. *I get it. The emperor must look suitable at all times, huh?*

The golden armor was actually magical. Elves and dwarves had forged it using all sorts of advanced techniques to protect the heroes fighting the dragons in ancient times. Once equipped, the armor was light as a feather, and protected its wearer from the fiery dragon breath that could turn a human into ash. The sun wouldn’t affect the armor. It was indeed a prized treasure—one that had once belonged to a small nation with quite the history. Only one man on the continent could get away with wearing a gift such as that.

“Emperor Wolfgang, please know that my country considers these gifts valuable.”

The Empire’s second emperor, Wolfgang—the Founding Emperor Wilhelm’s blood successor—wore an air of dignity as he graciously nodded.

“Hmm. Lord Shareef, the gift you’ve brought us...and the Sand Nation’s magic, which controls that gift...are truly a sight to behold.”

Wolfgang turned to observe the golden sea of sand stretching before him. Just as the servant who’d teleported them had said, this was indeed the Sand Nation.

Two magical items that, when combined, teleported their user to another location: those were the gifts that the Sand Nation had presented to the Empire as a symbol of friendship. The items were apparently two of the most important

of the nation's many treasures. There were none like them.

That was why the prince had felt that it was his responsibility to deliver the gifts directly. The young man had crossed the continent and visited the emperor on his throne.

"I see now why your country is named the Sand Nation. What a spectacular view."

Even the Empire's unfertile lands seemed bountiful compared to the desert stretching to the horizon.

Wolfgang understood at first glance that trying to conquer this nation with soldiers would be not only impossible but meaningless. He thought about how skilled the Sand Nation's citizens were at magic and how they could cross the ocean without having to sail dangerous boats.

"Well, I believe our two great nations can become excellent friends." The emperor came to the conclusion quickly. There was no telling what would happen in the future, but for now, they were allies. "My daughter will arrive at the castle shortly. I'll introduce her to you then."

Wolfgang's words were exactly what Shareef desired to hear.

"Wonderful!" the prince answered with a smile.

A few days later, Shareef's party returned to the palace, preparing to head for the Empire yet again. The prince left them behind to traverse a familiar path through the desert. As usual, the blazing sun above cast its hot rays down upon anyone beneath.

As he headed toward his destination, Shareef found that sensation somewhat fascinating. *Yeah, that's right. This is what the desert's like.*

He was alone today. His little sister wasn't with him; she wanted him to bring her back a take-out ice cream set to make up for not bringing her.

This door never changes. Er...wait. It has kind of changed.

The door with the cat plaque had a new, unfamiliar sign. "Nekoya, Restaurant to Another World," it read, reminding Shareef that half a year was quite a long

time.

With that thought in mind, he passed through the door as always. The familiar, nostalgic sound of bells ringing filled the air.

The first things the prince saw in the bright room were numerous customers and two waitresses busily tending to them. He was familiar with that sight, and encountering it again reminded Shareef that he was at last home.

The usual demon waitress noticed his arrival and greeted him. “Welcome! We’re happy to have you back! Let me take you to your seat.” She seated him immediately.

“Much obliged.”

Shareef looked around the restaurant. *It’s been a long time.*

Checking to see whether his beloved was present, he recalled how things used to be. Indeed, before he’d started bringing his sister here, all he could do was wait at his table silently.

A few years had passed since then, and Shareef was no longer the lovesick young man he’d once been.

Shareef made his usual order. “Could I get a coffee float, please? With ice cream. Make the cafa extra sweet—thank you.”

“Of course.”

He watched the waitress return to the kitchen to tell the master his order, then sipped the fruity water she’d brought him earlier. *Mmm. Delicious.*

The cold water seeped into his body, hot from the heat of the desert, and quenched his thirst. After spending half a year crossing the ocean and living in the chilly Empire, Shareef had grown somewhat sensitive to hot weather. Maybe that was why the cold glass of ice water seemed sweeter than usual.

The water was delicious in and of itself, but it had been half a year since Shareef had drunk the other world’s cafa. He knew it would be something else entirely.

I can’t wait.

As Shareef remembered the cafa's great flavor, he got more excited about what he'd ordered. Settling into his chair in the perfectly temperate room, he waited for his beloved. This time on his own was both fun and warmly nostalgic.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your coffee float!"

Shareef smiled at the treat the demon waitress brought out to him. "Thank you very much."

The clear glass was full of transparent black cafa; ice cubes floated at the very top. Above them sat a round scoop of yellowish ice cream. It'd been half a year since the prince had happened upon this type of beautiful coffee float.

Yes, yes! This is it!

He gulped, grabbed the strange tube made of otherworldly material, and began to suck up the black cafa. The first sip spread its sour, bittersweet flavor through Shareef's mouth.

Delicious. The other world can't be beat when it comes to this stuff.

The familiar flavor reminded Shareef of when he'd returned home and drunk cafa in the palace for the first time in a while.

The cafa Shareef drank on his journey wasn't particularly good.

They'd made sure to bring the best cafa beans they could from the Sand Nation, but something had been off. It hadn't tasted anything like the cafa from his home. Had the beans gone bad, or was the water different?

I recall my servants struggling quite a bit.

Anyone who lived in the Sand Nation was deeply familiar with how cafa was supposed to taste. Therefore, the men and women who'd served Shareef since he was a child saw the poor cafa as a massive problem. They'd tried changing the water, using sugar and various spices, and consulting Sand Nation nobility who'd left for the Empire ahead of them. They'd done everything in their power to make a delicious cup of cafa.

As it turned out, their efforts were rewarded. The cafa they drank in the Empire was quite good. However, compared to the Sand Nation's cafa, it was

still a different beast. Shareef and his servants would've been lying if they'd said that the Empire's cafa wasn't a bit disappointing.

That was precisely why his home country's cafa tasted especially delicious.

Having tasted all sorts of cafa on his journey, Shareef's tongue was especially sensitive to the other world's blend.

Compared to the cool cafa served in the Sand Nation, the stuff at Nekoya was lightly bitter and strongly sour. It was also nearly unsweetened but delicious. It was different from the Sand Nation's cafa, but still familiar, and it washed down Shareef's throat smoothly.

After enjoying the cafa on its own, Shareef grabbed the silver spoon set beside the glass and turned his attention to the ice cream. Having ordered the coffee float time and time again, he now knew how best to enjoy what it had to offer.

All right. Next up is...

As Shareef had enjoyed the cafa, the ice cream had started to melt. He used his spoon to scoop up some that was about to drip and took a bite. It quickly melted over the warmth of his tongue, leaving behind only the flavor of milk and a sweet taste in his mouth. This was ice cream in its most delicious form. It had begun melting but hadn't yet done so completely, giving it the perfect softness.

Shareef then took a spoonful of the unmelted inner ice cream and brought it to his mouth. This time, the ice cream lingered on his warm tongue for longer. It slowly melted as he enjoyed its mouthfeel and took a sip of cafa. The drink washed away the ice cream's cold, sweet aftertaste, and it felt excellent.

Time to sink the ship.

Shareef flipped the ice cream scoop—now half the size it once was—over, sinking it into the cafa. He stirred it into the drink.

Soon, the ice cream melted completely in the glass of black cafa, turning the coffee float brown. Shareef took a sip. The melted ice cream's presence sweetened the drink, causing the much-creamier cafa to taste completely different from before.

If the cafa had been something to experience with one's throat, it was now something to experience with one's stomach. A heavy flavor, so to speak.

Mmm. This is truly the best form of the coffee float.

Shareef was tremendously satisfied. Half a year had gone by, but he was pleased to find that the other world's taste hadn't changed one bit.

And then it happened.

The sound of bells ringing filled the air, announcing a customer's arrival. Shareef looked over immediately to see a young, blonde-haired woman standing in the doorway—the very woman that Shareef was madly in love with.

She surveyed the restaurant and made eye contact with Shareef, then smiled brightly.

That alone was enough to make Shareef's heart skip a beat. Suddenly, the cafa he was enjoying tasted infinitely sweeter.

I knew it. When Adelheid is around, my cafa tastes even more delicious than usual.

Now then, what to do, Shareef wondered as he finished off the rest of his cafa. Should he invite Adelheid over himself?

Special Chapter 5:

Egg Porridge

Aletta slowly opened her eyes to the sound of pouring rain. *Huh? Where am I?*

Her body and head were burning hot, and she felt powerless, unable to grasp her current situation. She was soaked in sweat.

Hrm. Suddenly, Aletta remembered something important. *Today's the Day of Satur!*

She tried to leap up out of bed but couldn't due to the heavy blanket on top of her. Aletta realized that she'd been asleep on a slightly dusty, but soft, futon.

What am I gonna do?

Thinking further, Aletta realized that things hadn't been going well since that morning.

Moving around had been a bit of a struggle, and she'd had a strange chill despite her body being warm. It didn't help that it had been raining since morning. Even with her rain jacket on, it was still cold.

Aletta couldn't remember anything after the sound of the Restaurant to Another World's bells had filled the air, so she must've passed out.

The thought, *Am I gonna be fired?* arose in her hot head.

It wasn't rare for someone to lose their job after getting sick and becoming incapable of working, however hard they'd worked beforehand. It wouldn't be long before Aletta ran through her savings, got kicked out of Sarah's home, and ultimately found herself out on the street. She'd remain ill, and just like before, she'd shiver from the intense cold...and finally die somewhere.

The awful scenario Aletta's feverish head came up with felt perfectly realistic to her. Even though she'd worked so hard up until now, it was all over. She couldn't help nearly coming to tears over her horrible new reality.

That was when a voice unexpectedly rang out in Aletta's mind. *I've brought water.*

Aletta slowly turned. An elf girl with beautiful black hair stood in front of her, seeming unsurprised. As usual, she made no sound and appeared to have simply sprouted out of the ground.

I've...brought water, the elf girl—Aletta's coworker, Kuro—repeated once more, her doll-like expression empty.

"Er, um, I..."

Kuro didn't blink as Aletta returned her gaze, wide-eyed with surprise. The black-haired waitress put down a tray on the table next to Aletta's pillow. On it were a single cup of water and a pitcher.

Would you like some? Kuro stared at the demon girl.

"U-um...yes, please."

Surprised by Kuro's actions, Aletta finally relaxed enough to slowly sit up. Since she was being careful, she had no problems, unlike before.

Here you go. Kuro held the cup of water out to the young demon.

"Th-thank you very much," Aletta said, taking the cup and drinking from it.

Ah...it's delicious.

The water was neither hot nor cold, but room temperature. It soaked into her dehydrated body, which had sweated out all its fluids.

After Aletta downed the water, Kuro unhesitatingly took the cup and filled it right back up again before offering it to the demon girl once more.

Here you are.

Once Aletta drank this second cup, she let out a sigh. Upon seeing Aletta's thirst quenched, Kuro turned her back, as if she'd accomplished her mission.

I have to get back to work. Master said he would bring you food later. Rest until then, she said, turning around slightly to look at Aletta.

Then she left via the door, like some sort of shadow.

Once Kuro was gone, Aletta was finally able to pay some attention to the room around her.

Actually, where am I?

Sitting up was still a bit too much for her, so she lay back down again and slowly looked around the room. She noticed some cardboard boxes—the very same type the food storage room held—but also a bunch of strange things she'd never seen before.

Through the transparent window glass, she saw that it was raining in the town made of gray stones. That must've been the outside world beyond the restaurant, a place Aletta rarely had the opportunity to lay eyes upon.

There was a series of skillful drawings on the dark wall on the other side of the room. All the illustrations were of people. A brown drawing of a young man and woman; a family picture of what seemed to be that same couple, now married and with a child; an image of a boy dressed in a brand-new-looking black suit, standing in front of a building. Even a portrait of a young couple dressed in white, likely at their wedding ceremony.

One particular image showed an older man and a younger man standing shoulder to shoulder, wearing the Restaurant to Another World's chef uniforms. The latter had no beard, and was much younger than he looked now, but was undoubtedly the master.

Is this his grandfather's room, then? Aletta wondered.

She'd heard that the master had a grandfather who'd taught him everything there was to know about cooking, and that he'd been the master of the restaurant up until ten years ago.

With that in mind, Aletta turned her attention to the family picture. *This must be the master's family.*

The woman looked much like the older woman, the master's grandmother, who'd dropped by the restaurant not too long ago. If that was the case, the child was likely the master's father.

As Aletta puzzled through the master's family history, she heard the door open. The master stepped into the room, holding a tray with a little pot on it.

“Yo, feeling okay? I finally finished dealing with the customers and got some free time.” He looked at Aletta’s face and sighed in relief before smiling. “Excellent. You look much better, compared to when you collapsed. I’m glad you don’t seem to have the flu.”

“Um, I...I’m so sorry.” All Aletta could do was squeeze out her words of regret. She swallowed the rest of them.

“No worries. Everyone catches a cold now and then. It’s more important that you take the time to rest. Your job as a patient is to eat, sleep, and get better. Got it?”

It was unclear whether the master could read how Aletta felt, but he nonetheless continued to smile at the young woman, placing the tray down on the table.

“You ought to get something in your stomach before taking medicine, so I made you some porridge. Think you can eat a little?” The master removed the pot lid.

A warm aroma filled the air, making Aletta’s stomach growl. Her face was already red from her fever, but she lit up even more.

“Great...you still have your appetite!”

The master grinned and placed the lid to the side, using a spoon to stir the pot’s contents slightly. He poured some porridge into the bowl he’d brought with him.

The yellow-and-white fluid was full of some kind of small green things. For the master, porridge itself was a nostalgic dish, something he often ate when he was sick.

“Here.” He handed Aletta the bowl just as she managed to sit upright. “Can you feed yourself?”

“Y-yes. Here I go...” She gulped, scooped up some porridge, and brought it to her mouth.

It was hot, but not so hot as to burn her tongue. It slid down her throat without needing her to chew, coming to a rest in her stomach.

“Fwaaah...” Aletta could only sigh in response to its taste.

The porridge was different from most of the dishes the Restaurant to Another World served. It had a thin flavor; a slight saltiness went along with the taste of the broth. Still, that was the perfect level of flavor for someone sick, like Aletta.

“How is it?”

Aletta couldn’t help smiling at the worried master. She went after another spoonful of porridge. “It’s very good.”

“Good, good. Take your time, all right? I’ve got plenty more. Once you’re done, take your medicine, sleep, and freshen up—you’ll be good as new.”

“All right. Thank you so much, Master.”

In response to the master’s words and the warm meal he’d served her, Aletta felt her heart grow many times lighter. She was no longer worried.

Seeing Aletta relieved relaxed the master as well. The demon girl was going to be okay.

The pair passed the time together, listening to the pitter-patter of rainfall outside.

Side Story 1:

Assorted Sandwiches

The day after I worked at the Restaurant to Another World, I always ended up sleeping a bit later.

Normally, once dawn broke, I woke up from the brightness. On the Day of Sun, however, I pulled my wool blanket over my head and rested until midday.

In the other world, the Day of Sun followed the Day of Satur. I didn't have work on the Day of Sun, so it was totally fine if I slept a little extra. That was what the master told me!

Since the restaurant was constantly lit by magic lights, I sometimes forgot that I always worked until late at night. By the time I went home, the sun was already long gone, and it was pitch-black outside. So, there wasn't much I could do about waking up late, right?

Once it was bright out, and my drowsiness was gone, I finally awoke for real.

"Fwaaah..." With a tiny yawn, I brushed the straw out of my hair.

I actually quite liked touching my hair, especially since I got to do it up at the Restaurant to Another World. It was all smooth and pretty!

It made me really happy how clean me, my hair, and even my clothes were. Every Day of Satur, I got to make my one outfit nice and clean again.

In the other world, all I had to do was put my clothes in a box, add the magical potion, and press a button. Then the magic tool automatically cleaned and dried them! Master washed my clothes for me along with his own work clothes.

No matter how dirty my clothes got in the morning, by the time I was ready to go home, they smelled great—and even the hardest stains to get out were gone!

Oh, and because the master let me use the shower before I went home, I was always nice and warm and ready for bed.

I was grateful enough that he paid me well and fed me such delicious meals, but he always took such good care of me even outside of those things. When I told him that I lived in some ruins, he responded that it must be rough to live like that and gave me all kinds of strange tools.

“They’re not much,” he said. “Just some cheap, used stuff. So, don’t feel bad about taking them.”

To me, however, each and every tool was a prized possession. That was why I made a point of using them myself as much as possible instead of trying to sell them.

When I woke up, the first thing I did was head to the lake so I could wash my face. I always made sure to take the mysterious box that the master had given me. He called it a “plastic container.”

That slightly rough—but pretty—box was amazing! It apparently wasn’t made from wood, metal, stone, or even bone. It was so tough that when I dropped it, it was totally fine. Plus, it was light! And however hard I pulled the lid, it didn’t come undone. I had to turn the lid to open it, so the plastic box was perfect for water.

In my other hand, I carried a small, smooth barrel with no handle that I’d gotten from the master. I kept my self-care goods inside it. Those were all super important to me, so I made sure to go to a lake pretty far from the capital so that others didn’t see them. It took a little time to get there, but it was worth it.

After looking at my breakfast, which I’d hidden in the straw, I went to freshen up.

The lake water was nice and clear. Since I’d washed yesterday, I just had to clean my hands, face, and hair. Wetting my blonde locks slightly, I looked at my face in the water’s reflection and combed my bedhead away.

My hair was curly and kind of tough. Since I’d washed it twice at the restaurant, though, it was nice and soft, and my curls were plenty smooth. It never took long to care for my hair on the Day of Sun.

I moved on to my teeth. The master had given me a brush to use, so I put

some medicine mixed with peppermint on it and began to brush them.

I really disliked the minty flavor, but the master told me that if I skipped cleaning my teeth after eating, they'd get holes and it'd super-duper hurt. Now, I always made sure to brush.

Eventually, the medicine got bubbly and filled my mouth with the taste of mint. I did my best to endure the sensation.

Once I finished brushing, I drank some of the water I'd poured into my old wooden cup, rinsed my mouth, and spat it all out. I didn't enjoy the mint medicine, but I really liked the feeling when I finished brushing my teeth.

After that, I filled my smooth barrel with water and washed my hands and face.

The soap that the master had given me smelled like peaches, not oil. He was happy to have received it as a gift, but because it was scented, he couldn't use it. So, he gave me lots. I made bubbles by rubbing the soap between my hands, closed my eyes, and scrubbed them over my face. The soap's sweet scent spread everywhere.

I already knew full well that the soap didn't actually taste very good, so I made sure not to open my mouth while lathering my face. Afterward, I used water from my barrel to wash all the soap off. *The end!*

According to the master, I should take extra care to wash my hands before eating. Otherwise, I was likelier to get sick.

To be honest, if someone as poor as me got sick, they couldn't really turn to doctors or priests for help. So, I'd just end up dead. That was why I made sure to do as the master said, washing my hands properly before every meal.

"All done! Time to head back."

With my morning preparations finished, I headed back to the ruins, where breakfast was waiting.

Breakfast on Day of Sun mornings was the one time, besides the Day of Satur, when I got to eat the other world's precious food.

I pulled the box out from where I hid it in the straw. The box itself was made

from pretty, sturdy paper; the master called it a “lunch box.” Inside it was my breakfast, wrapped in a paper bag.

Its contents were the same as always—an assortment of sandwiches. An absolute feast.

As I opened the box, I spotted the usual white bread. Between the slices were the sandwiches’ yellow, brown, and pink insides. I couldn’t help but gulp in anticipation.

“Oh, great demon lord—and master—I thank you for this bountiful feast.” I wanted to eat, but I did my best to hold back as I gave thanks to God.

Finally, the time came.

I started with the square sandwich with yellow insides on the far right. It was cut in half, showing its yellow filling with white dots, which were actually smashed boiled eggs. I always made a point of eating this sandwich first.

As I bit into it, I tasted the bread’s gentle sweetness, the slightly spicy butter spread on it, and boiled eggs mixed with mayo.

As I chewed the white dots peppered through the smashed eggs, I felt them get even more smooshed.

Sandwiches came in all shapes and sizes, but I liked the egg sandwich best of all.

Of course, I liked the other flavors, too. After finishing the egg sandwich, I moved on to the tuna mayo sandwich next to it.

Biting into the sandwich, I tasted a sharp heat different from the eggs. Fresh chopped oranie were mixed into the tuna. There was also pepper in it, so even though it had mayo as the same basic seasoning, the tuna mayo sandwich tasted completely different from the egg sandwich.

I ate the tuna mayo sandwich second because of that seasoning. If I’d eaten it first, it would’ve been shocking so early in the day.

Unlike eggs, tuna had a strong, meaty flavor, so it tasted better when seasoned more heavily. Or, at least, that was what the master said. I didn’t really understand the particulars, but I did know that this tuna mayo sandwich

was mouthwatering.

Every time I bit into the ocean meat, its flavor-filled oils poured out. The tuna had a delicious, unique taste; it blended well with the hot oranie and pepper.

The third sandwich I ate was made with smoked meat, cheese, and cucumber. Between the buttered bread slices were several pieces of cheese and pink smoked meat.

Smoked meat and cheese both existed in this world, so I was familiar with how they tasted. Because I came from a poor family, though, we only ever ate cobbler's tubers, so I never had much of a chance to eat meat.

I opened wide and dug into the sandwich, biting through the numerous meat slices.

Otherworldly smoked meat wasn't particularly salty, so I could eat a ton at once, and it was super delicious. Oh, and the cheese slices were different from the hard stuff I was familiar with! They were really soft and easy to eat.

But it wasn't just that the whole sandwich was soft; there was cucumber in it. Cucumber didn't have much taste on its own, but the master had cut it into diagonal pieces and slipped them between the meat slices.

The sandwich's texture changed completely based on whether there was cucumber in a bite or not, which was apparently why the master had put it in.

I didn't really understand completely, but I did feel like the soft sandwich was tastier when I chewed the last bit and heard the snapping noises mixed with the faint taste of vegetables.

Eventually, I finished off all but the last sandwich: the dessert. Nobles apparently had some kind of sweet fruit or pastry at the end of every meal. That may have been why the master always included a sweet, pastry-like sandwich in the assorted sandwich set.

The final sandwich was full of orange-colored marmalade. It was sweet and tasted totally different from the other sandwiches, so I always ended up eating it last.

A long time ago, I used to eat fruit I'd found in the forest. Other than that,

though, I'd never really had much in the way of sweets. At least, not until I started going to the Restaurant to Another World.

Cookies, for example, were so sweet and delicious that they felt as if they'd melt in your mouth.

Sweets here were super expensive, unlike in the other world. So, even though I got paid a lot now, I still didn't buy any.

That was why this last sandwich was super important to me. I only got to eat it once a week, just like the cookies I got during my break.

I took a sip of water, cleared my mouth, and reached for the final sandwich. I could see transparent orange marmalade between the two white bread slices; it was super-duper pretty and delicious-looking.

I once again gulped and took a bite. The slightly bitter, slightly sour, super-sweet marmalade flavor filled my mouth, causing me to smile.

The marmalade sandwich was so delicious that it was kind of too bad there was only one in the set. But the master had said that part of the reason it was so delicious was because there was only one, and he was probably right.

After finishing all four sandwiches, I drank some water and let out a slow, satisfied sigh. When I was full like this, I couldn't help feeling happy, like I could power my way through the whole day.

"All right!"

I stood up, ready to go. It was too late to look for work today, so I was taking a day off from that.

Fortunately, I had money, so I was going to do some shopping to get what I'd need for the next six days.

I brushed the straw off the hems of my clothes, shouldered my stuff, and headed to the marketplace.

Side Story 2: Pudding Parfait

I headed to the usual restaurant, sat in my usual seat, and looked over the room like I always did. I, Victoria, had done this for a few years now.

Now that I think about it, this place has gotten quite busy over time.

My little brother had invited me to a luncheon earlier, which was why I was at the restaurant quite a while after midday. Still, it was a bit too early to begin drinking.

Back when I'd first successfully summoned the restaurant door on my own and started coming here, there weren't many customers. It was usually just my master—he gets angry if you don't call him Pork Loin Cutlet—sitting back, enjoying some ale. I'd quietly enjoyed my pudding à la mode on my own.

Lately, however, more customers visited at this time of day in search of specific menu items. As one of those very customers, I knew well why this time slot had gotten busier. Most of us who visited the restaurant around this time were here to eat the other world's unique treats and desserts.

The other world's sweets were far more refined than ours. In my world, we made treats from milk or water kneaded into flour and wheat, mixed with sugar, and baked. We had seasonal fruit, fruit soaked in honey or sugar, and balls of literally just honey.

However, the other world was completely different. Its desserts and snacks were beautiful and delicious.

I'd first discovered that for myself about ten years ago. At the time, I was traveling with my master on all sorts of adventures in pursuit of knowledge. This little restaurant in another world had been the last place we found ourselves. Over the following months, I'd spent my time eating every single treat this place offered, writing down a description of each item in the restaurant's menu.

There were all sorts of people in the world, but I was fairly certain that I was the only one who'd actually eaten every sweet at the Restaurant to Another World. That was why I loved it when new customers visited around this time of day.

Today, I noticed a new comrade in the restaurant. The sound of bells filled the air, signifying their arrival.

"Well, well. What shall I order today?"

The new guest was a blonde woman clad in a red dress. She was likely from the Empire, judging by her height. She looked to be around my age, which meant she was actually probably close to twenty years younger than me.

I bet she's only just come of age, I thought.

She was wearing a pretty dress that was, perhaps, a bit too simple for something worn in front of others. From the way she held herself, she was clearly nobility, not a commoner.

"Perhaps I'll order another chocolate parfait," she murmured. "But eating that three times in a row seems like a waste."

The fact that this young woman was eyeing a chocolate parfait meant that she was here with the same purpose I was—sweets.

Glancing at the busy demon waitress, I spoke up. "Hey, you. Would you care to join me?"

As a Nekoya regular and a veteran customer, I saw nothing wrong with breaking the ice with a fellow visitor.

"Oh, I'd love to." The girl raised her head from the menu and nodded before asking, "Um...and you are?"

"My name's Victoria, but I'd be happy if you called me 'Pudding' here."

I gave her both my real name and my name in the restaurant. I doubted that anybody remembered the name of the Duchy princess who hadn't shown her face in public in some twenty years, but there was nothing wrong with playing it safe.

"Oh, my. Is that so? My name's Adelheid. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady

Pudding.”

“Wait just a second.” I couldn’t help shaking my head internally at Adelheid’s introduction, since the young lady just so happened to be the imperial princess.

When it came to the Empire’s nobles, only one person was named Adelheid. Simply no aristocrats in that nation would dare name their daughter after the great Empire’s founding mother.

“Oh—is something wrong?”

“I’d advise you not to use your real name too often here. It’s kind of a rule that we all go by nicknames based on our favorite foods.” I did my best to teach her how to lay low.

“Is that so? You do that, too, Lady Pudding?”

“Yes. Pudding is the most delicious treat on the menu.”

“Wow! I had no idea.” The imperial princess nodded and furrowed her brow, looking taken aback and somewhat dissatisfied.

“With that in mind, what will you choose to call yourself?” I asked.

“Shouldn’t that be obvious? ‘Chocolate Parfait’! It’s so very delicious.”

I see.

“In that case, you should cut it down to just ‘Parfait,’” I explained further to the somewhat puzzled imperial princess. “This restaurant serves all kinds of parfaits. Chocolate is just one of many.”

“Oh—you’re right.” The princess thought for a moment before nodding.

“‘Parfait’ it is, then!”

Parfaits were prone to falling apart and melting very quickly, so they weren’t available for take-out. The great thing about them was that, by adjusting a parfait’s ingredients, one could turn it into something else entirely.

In some ways, my beloved pudding à la mode was actually a type of parfait. At least, that was what the master had once told me.

So, this is the princess’s third time here.

According to what Parfait had said, she’d eaten chocolate parfaits during her

first two trips here. In other words, she didn't know the joy that was pudding and custard. Sure, chocolate parfaits were delicious, but they didn't have pudding or custard in them.

I grabbed a menu and opened it for Parfait. "Here's the menu. From here to here are all the parfaits."

"I know. I was stunned to find out that there were so many different kinds."

She'd apparently struggled with choice during her last visit.

"If you've had a chocolate parfait before, I recommend this pudding parfait." I urged the princess to try what I believed to be the most delicious of parfaits.

"Oh, I see. Then I'll have that today!"

Once Parfait nodded, I called over the demon waitress the restaurant had recently hired.

"Yes? How can I help you?" she asked.

"We'd like to order now." I decided to take a day off from pudding à la mode and have a pudding parfait as well. "Two pudding parfaits, please."

"That's two pudding parfaits? Got it. Hang tight." The demon waitress returned to the kitchen.

"What kind of dessert is it?" the princess asked.

"It's a parfait made from pudding, a kind of egg-based dessert. It's very good."

"Egg-based? Oh, my. I've never had something like that before. I can't wait to try it!"

After I explained the parfait to the princess, the two of us chatted peacefully for a bit. A few moments passed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Two pudding parfaits."

The demon waitress placed two large glasses in front of us. Today's objective.

"Oh, my. This is..." The shining yellow-and-brown pudding made Parfait's eyes sparkle.

I nodded at her. "Pudding, yes."

The main ingredient in a pudding parfait, just like pudding à la mode, was pudding. All kinds of delicious treats were stuffed into the beautiful parfait glass. Unlike the pudding à la mode, the pudding parfait didn't include anything cold or frozen, so I made a point of ordering it during the winter as well.

The pudding parfait was as beautiful as the pudding à la mode, but in a different way. Above the yellow pudding and white whipped cream, a host of different colors were layered atop one another.

"Shall we eat?"

"Yes!"

There was no reason to hold back. The two of us picked up our long parfait spoons simultaneously and began eating.

I took a spoonful of the beautiful whipped cream decorating the top of the parfait and brought it to my mouth. As the fluffy cream melted, I tasted milk. It was perfectly sweet, causing me to smile.

I kept attacking the cream surrounding the pudding. I was the type who liked to start from the outside and work my way in. I dug into the white whipped cream and then attacked the banana slices and otherworldly strawberries decorating the parfait's border.

In the center of their sweetness, the boiled berries tasted slightly sour. The cream was sugary, and the fresh bananas were ripe. They were all delicious, and they went particularly well with custard.

They were basically garnishes on the main dish, but I was quite fond of them nonetheless.

Meanwhile, Parfait began to devour the pudding straightaway. "Oh, my. So, this is pudding? It looks so soft and smooth...and delicious."

With each spoonful, the princess's beautiful pudding collapsed further. As I watched her eat, I found myself craving a spoonful of pudding as well, but I held myself back and focused on the fruit and whipped cream.

Once they were gone, I finally made my way to the smooth, soft pudding, which jiggled on my spoon. I made sure to get some caramel atop it as well and

then enjoyed the first bite. That was how I always did things.

Mmm. Delicious as always.

I couldn't help being charmed by the perfection that was pudding. However many times I ate it, its flavor impressed me. My hand sped up, and soon the pudding at the top of the parfait began to collapse.

Meanwhile, Parfait had moved on from the pudding and was enjoying the rich flavors of the fruit and whipped cream.

"Oh, my. Are these candied fruits?" she asked. "They go so well with the cream."

She looked utterly charmed by their deliciousness. Satisfied by that sight, I finished off my first pudding of the day.

Now that the two of us had eaten the parfait's upper layers, we finally moved on to the stuff hidden at the bottom of the glass.

Parfait didn't appear familiar with the sponge cake below the pudding and cream.

"Oh, what's this at the bottom? Bread of some sort?" She poked at the pudding-colored cake curiously.

"Ah, this is sponge cake. It basically serves as the base for tons of baked pastries called 'cakes.'" I gave Parfait a quick primer and then turned my attention back to the cake.

At first glance, sponge cake looked like regular bread, but it was actually completely different. By itself, it was a positively delicious pastry. Since it wasn't overly sweet, it served as the perfect follow-up to pudding. You didn't see it used much in parfaits with ice cream, because it got wet and soggy.

"It's soft and completely different from bread. How scrumptious!"

It looked as if Parfait was already quite fond of it. She dug a hole in the sponge cake with her spoon, only to spot something.

"Oh, my. Is this cream? But it's a bit yellow."

"Judging by the color, there must be lemon mixed in. That's why it's yellow."

Whipped cream was so soft and light that it went well with all kinds of things. For example, you could pair it with very sour fruit, uniquely bitter chocolate, or even coffee. It didn't overpower them, but rather, made them sweeter and easier to eat.

In the pudding parfait's case, the master placed whipped cream combined with fruit beneath the sponge cake. Which fruit he used differed based on the season, so the taste wound up being something of a surprise.

"Wow!" Parfait exclaimed. "Just from adding a bit of sourness, the cream's flavor stands out even more! It's completely different!"

Since first coming to this restaurant, I'd learned that mixing something bitter or sour into something sweet could emphasize the latter much more strongly. By itself, a lemon was sour and not sweet in the slightest. But combine its skin and pulp with cream and suddenly it was a perfect little treat.

Judging by the speed of Parfait's hands, she seemed to have taken to this great taste. "Oh, my! Is this chocolate now?"

"Not quite."

Underneath the lemon cream was a layer of gorgeous-looking chocolate—but not actually. The thing in question definitely resembled chocolate but was a bit brighter in color.

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. This is chocolate custard." That was right. It was a cream made of chocolate and the custard used in pudding.

"This is a little different from regular chocolate, but it's quite good," I explained to Parfait.

I took a bite of chocolate custard. The chocolate's bitter flavor mixed with the smooth custard's sweet taste. It gently caressed my tongue.

Parfait was also enjoying the flavor in her own way, her eyes narrowed. She smiled. As her spoon continued to delve in, she stumbled upon the final excitement of the day.

"Oh, my. Is this...pudding?"

“Exactly. This is milk pudding made with cream.”

The pudding parfait’s final layer, milk pudding, was the second bit of pudding in the dish. It was whiter than custard pudding and so soft that it was incapable of holding its form anywhere but the bottom of the parfait glass.

The rich milk flavor was perfect to close out the pudding parfait. It wasn’t overly sweet, which helped soothe one’s mouth after indulging in chocolate custard. In fact, it was because the milk pudding came after the cloying chocolate custard that it shone so brightly.

“Oh, my! I can’t believe there’s even cream pudding! It’s so much softer than the custard pudding on top. How delightful.”

I listened to Parfait as I very seriously indulged in the final spoonful of my dessert. The remnants of the chocolate custard above mixed with the milk pudding.

Eaten on its own, the milk pudding would’ve been a bit too thin to be satisfying. However, that very lightness was welcome after eating the pudding parfait. The custard pudding in pudding à la mode was delicious, but this milk pudding was something else entirely.

The two of us finished our parfaits around the same time and put our spoons down, satisfied.

Instead of offering my opinion of the parfait, I simply sighed out my feelings. “Delicious.”

I didn’t normally talk to myself, but today, I wasn’t alone. Someone was here with me to share in this wonderful pudding experience.

Parfait spoke up, almost as if responding. “Indeed. That was delightful. Enjoying it after it mixes with the fruit juice...eating it with pudding...there are all sorts of ways to enjoy the whipped cream.”

I couldn’t let that go.

“Remember, pudding and custard are the pudding parfait’s main ingredients,” I corrected the girl—er, Parfait. “Whipped cream is just an extra.”

Yes, whipped cream was delicious, but it wasn’t the star. It couldn’t be.

“That’s not true at all,” Parfait replied without missing a beat. “Why, yes, custard and pudding are both wonderful. Still, the cream’s light sweetness, and the way that it gently melts in your mouth, are unsurpassed.”

I immediately stared at her. It looked as though she refused to back down as well, her own fierce glare directed right back at me.

Custard was better than cream. That was a clear truth of this world, yet Parfait refused to acknowledge it. I couldn’t help but get a little frustrated.

Fine. As a mage who’s dedicated her life to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, I quite like debating others.

I decided to explain in great detail to the young girl why custard won out over whipped cream in all respects. Parfait didn’t appear willing to surrender her belief in cream’s superiority, but that was all right. I’d make her throw in the towel eventually.

Our fierce argument over which was better went on until the evening.

“It’s about time to part ways. Let’s revisit this when next we meet,” Parfait said as she left, her stride a bit frenzied.

In her hands were the parting gifts I’d bought for her: two fruit sandwiches—one made with cream, the other custard—so that she could compare them.

“You should try these sandwiches and then get back to me about which is more delicious,” I’d told her.

If she ate them, even that young girl should realize which was superior. That’d be the fastest way to teach the stubborn little one about the joys of take-out pudding.

“Now then.”

Satisfied with the future lurking over the horizon, I decided to head back myself. I’d spent far too much time in fierce debate today, and it was already almost evening. I took my pudding as usual and made my way toward the exit.

“Hrm. Things have been quite interesting here lately.”

Before I reached the door, my master—who’d been watching us this whole time, drinking his ale—spoke up with a smile on his face.

“Well, that was sudden, Mast...Pork Loin Cutlet.”

“Oh, don’t mind me! I was just thinking about the old days.” He narrowed his eyes in thought. “Hey, Pudding, which is better? Croquettes or mincemeat cutlets?”

“Excuse me?”

Master’s random question puzzled me. I’d had both dishes, and they were delicious, but I’d never given much thought to which was better.

“Not that it matters. Pork loin cutlet is obviously best.” Master sipped his beer, seeming to care little for my opinion. “Now, now. Time to go home. Going forward, I imagine that you and that young lady may see quite a bit of each other.”

“Hmm.” I tilted my head in response, opened the restaurant door, and returned to my own room.

Seven days later, the young girl, Parfait, once again visited Nekoya, gracefully sat at my table, and immediately offered me her unbelievable conclusion.

“After eating both sandwiches, I still believe cream to be the most delicious.”

Side Story 3: Sautéed Pork

Slightly annoyed by the drizzling rain, I hastened my pace, heading toward the village.

Just ahead of this road was a small village near a forest where a handful of ogres lived. The ogres had been attacking and eating local livestock and little girls, so the village was having some trouble. The problem was that, when villagers posted a request that someone destroy these sorts of monsters, the payout was typically so cheap that nobody picked up the job.

Overhearing this particular tale in a bar I happened to be at, I'd decided to head for the village. Yes, the pay was cheap, but saving villagers from ogres might as well have been part of my job description as a warrior. Plus, I'd yet to cut down an ogre on the Eastern Continent. So, why not?

That said, I almost gave up when I heard that I'd have to walk through empty grasslands for three straight days before hitting the village.

There were no mountains to be seen, no matter how hard I squinted. After walking for two straight days, there was still nothing but empty plains. That served as a reminder that I really was a long way from home. This kind of geography simply didn't exist there.

When I'd aged past twenty, I'd realized that—however talented I was in the way of the sword—I had no chance of inheriting any status because I had four older brothers. At the rate I was going, I'd have to serve for the rest of my life under my weaker, untrained siblings, who envied my abilities.

So, I'd left home for the capital with only my two swords by my side, slaying ogres and monsters to pay for food and shelter. Eventually I heard that, across the ocean, young folks like me called “adventurers” survived using only their skills. That was when I decided to cross the ocean to the Eastern Continent.

Three years had passed quickly. I'd learned the language and gotten used to the culture that ate bread instead of rice. I was finally losing my Western Continent accent.

As someone who'd grown up in the mountains, though, I still wasn't used to the geography here.

Let's see. Is there somewhere I can take shelter from this rain? Hmm?

As I looked for a tree or perhaps a large stone I could use for cover, my eyes stumbled upon something strange.

A door.

A little way from the road, a door stood in the middle of a field.

What the...? Why would a door be in a place like this?

Struck by curiosity, I made my way off the path and toward the door. As I got closer, I saw a cat illustration on its front.

How mysterious...and fascinating. As luck had it, I'd just started to feel a bit bored.

I didn't hesitate for a moment as I placed my hand on the golden doorknob and turned it, opening the door. The sound of bells ringing made its way to my ears. After confirming that no ambush was coming from the other side, I stepped through slowly.

Beyond the door, I found myself in a truly unexpected place. There were no windows, but it was strangely bright. Eastern-style tables and chairs were arranged throughout the room.

Bizarre.

A man sitting at one table was drinking some sort of golden ale. He must've been a mage, judging by his clothes and the staff nearby.

Where am I? Since I wasn't exactly the brightest, I decided to ask the only other person present—the mage.

"Pardon me, sir. Where exactly are we?"

The mage stopped sipping his ale and stood up. "Ah. Long story short, this is

an eatery in another world—the Restaurant to Another World.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me right. It’s a restaurant in a separate world and dimension, connected to ours via an ancient elven relic. Actually, you’re the first person other than me to come in here. That door must be multiplying, just as I imagined.”

It appeared as though I’d wandered into a place far more mysterious than I’d first thought. With that in mind, I stared at the mage, the only one who knew anything about this restaurant.



He looked back at me and spoke. “Hmm...you have a slight accent. Are you from the Western Continent’s Mountain Nation?”

“My word.”

These days, no one recognized where I’d come from, so the fact that this man saw my origins so quickly was quite a surprise. As a mage, he must’ve had an abundance of knowledge.

“My name is Tatsugorou.” Doing my best to correct my accent, I bowed my head to the mage. “As you suspect, I hail from the Mountain Nation on the Western Continent, Sir Mage.”

Based on the magical energies coming from this mage, he was clearly more accomplished than any of the sorcerers I’d seen in my homeland.

“Now, now. No need to be so serious. It was pure chance that I heard your accent. A long time ago, I traveled with someone from the Mountain Nation. Your accent resembled theirs, is all. That’s how I figured it out, honestly.”

The mage was quite candid, very different from the spiteful sorcerers of my homeland and the Ocean Nation. He seemed easy to talk to.

He introduced himself. “My name is...let’s see...call me Pork Loin Cutlet. As you can tell, I’m just an older gentleman who uses a wee bit of magic.”

“Pork Loin Cutlet?!” *What a bizarre name.*

“Indeed. Well, it’s nice to meet you, Sir Tatsugorou.”

“Pork Loin Cutlet” didn’t match up with the many names I’d heard on the Eastern Continent. I supposed that just meant there was still much for me to learn about this land. With that thought, I again bowed my head to the older man.

“The pleasure is all mine, Sir Pork Loin Cutlet.”

Then I caught a whiff of some sort of warm aroma.

Someone was right next to me. “Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya. Have a seat, please.”

I raised my head and found a stunningly beautiful woman standing before me.

She had deep-black hair, and she wore clothes that reminded me of the Eastern Continent's noblewomen. In her hands were some kind of soft cloth and a steaming tray.

I couldn't help being shocked that this woman had somehow gotten next to me, a warrior, without my having noticed.

"The rain must be awful today," the woman said. "I've brought you a towel and some tea. You wouldn't want to catch a cold. Here, wipe yourself with this." She moved without making a single sound.

"Ah, much obli...er, thank you very much."

Upon closer inspection, the woman's face had some very slight wrinkles. She must've been about the same age my late mother was when I came of age.

The woman smiled at me, and I frantically tried to hide my blushing face as she led me to my seat. I used the strangely soft cloth she handed me to dry my moist face and hair, then took a sip of the hot tea.

What a surprise! The tea the woman had brought me tasted just like rice but also had a slightly aromatic flavor. It warmed my cold body.

"I do indeed sense...er, this tastes like rice."

"That's because it's black rice tea," she said.

"Black rice tea?" I tilted my head. I'd never heard of it before.

Well, considering that this is another world, I suppose that shouldn't be much of a surprise.

"It's quite delicious," I said. "In fact, it's so good that I'd love another cup."

I proceeded to down the cup of tea. It was truly marvelous and reminded me of how much I'd yearned for rice over the last few years.

The woman clearly picked up that I'd been craving rice. "Would you like me to bring out a bowl of white rice and some food?" she offered.

"Really?! That would be wonderful!"

Grateful for her kindness, I nodded enthusiastically at the fact that I'd get to eat rice for the first time in three years.

Rice didn't exist on the Eastern Continent, but it existed here. I should've expected as much from another world.

"All right, then. Let's see. How about sautéed pork to go with your rice? Pig cooked over flames?"

I nodded. "That sounds delightful."

Pig meat was fairly common on the Eastern Continent. In fact, people raised the creatures specifically to eat. On the Western Continent, however, we really only ate pork when we took down a wild boar.

White rice...

This would be a feast for the ages—something I didn't have access to very often. Particularly the rice. I couldn't possibly let this chance escape me. I was willing to pay whatever I had to.

"Hey, that's..." Sir Pork Loin Cutlet was about to say something.

The woman smiled and shut him up. "Oh, my. You're only on your third dish. And you have plenty of time, right, Mr. Can-Use-a-Wee-Bit-of-Magic?"

"Urgh...fine." The older gentleman forced the words out. "The young fellow can go first. But only just this once."

It appeared as though Pork Loin Cutlet and the woman went way back. They were clearly comfortable with one another.

"I'll be right back with your food." The woman disappeared into the kitchen.

As I waited for my meal, I heard cooking noises from the back. Eventually, the sounds ended, and I sensed someone preparing to bring the food out to me.

But it was a man dressed in mysterious clothes who appeared before me, rather than the woman from earlier. He looked rather aged but definitely still had his stuff straight. He must've been the restaurant's master and chef.

"Sorry 'bout the wait, pal."

"Um, what happened to the woman from before?" I asked.

"My wife went home. It's almost noon, and she doesn't wanna leave our grandkids all by their lonesome after they get back," the man answered bluntly.

“I see.” I couldn’t mask the disappointment in my voice. I would’ve loved to have spoken to her a bit more.

“Sorry you gotta deal with this old man instead. But, hey, here’s your teriyaki-style sautéed pork.” He placed the tray of food on the table lightly.

“Um, what’s this?” I looked down, confused.

I recognized the pork, which was decorated with some kind of brownish sauce. It was cut into strips, making it easy to pick up with chopsticks. Beside the strips was a bowl of brown soup with thinly cut bits of something floating in it.

I couldn’t find the most important part of the meal, though. The one thing I wanted to eat above all else. *Where’s the rice? Wait...*

“Could this be rice?”

In front of the pork and soup sat a bowl full of what I realized was rice. However, it was nothing like the dark rice I’d eaten back home. It was pure white, translucent, and shone like polished stones.

It was completely different.

“That’s right,” the man said. “When you take out all the sprouts and bran before cooking it, you get this pure-white rice. I’ve heard that brown rice is better for the body, but when it comes to taste, nothing beats white rice.”

“How grand.”

He hadn’t just peeled the hulls off; he’d even removed the rice’s sprouts and bran before cooking it. I couldn’t begin to imagine how much lighter the rice must be. Even in a house of proud warriors, one wouldn’t serve rice like this unless it were some sort of special occasion.

Continually surprised by the incredible feast the restaurant was serving me, I picked up the bowl of rice, swallowed loudly, and took a single bite.

Oooh! It’s so soft...and sweet?!

I knew I’d eaten rice. I knew it in my mind. Still, this rice tasted completely different from the stuff back home. It was pure and clean, yet its hot steam was flavorful. It was so soft that I could swallow it without chewing, but when I did

chew it, I tasted something sweet.

Just this rice on its own would've been an incredible feast. It wasn't long before I gulped down the entire bowl as though it were water.

"Oh, you're a real pro, eh? Want seconds?"

"Absolutely!" I nodded with gusto at the master, handing him the completely empty bowl.

"Comin' right up! Hold your horses."

I watched the master disappear into the back and then turned my attention to the food on the tray. *I wonder what all this tastes like.*

Just the white rice had been enough to satisfy me. Still, I found myself enthralled by the scents coming from the other foods.

I'll start with the soup.

I picked up the small black bowl and brought it close to my nose, breathing in the steam rising from it. The brown soup was full of cut vegetables. I didn't recall ever drinking a soup like that out west or in the east. It had a mysterious aroma that was hard to put into words, so I simply took a sip.

It's hot but delicious. In fact, the soup was so hot that I almost burned myself. As I drank more, I made sure to blow on it to cool it down. It was salty and had a slight earthy scent.

The vegetables floating in the broth were so soft, it was almost like they were about to melt. When I bit into them, their juices spilled through my mouth.

From its taste, I finally figured out what one vegetable was. *Oh, this is radish.*

In the Mountain Nation, I'd eaten radish quite often, so that really brought me back. It was a little less bitter than I recalled, but that was what was good about it.

Then I turned my attention to the green pickles. I only put a few into my mouth but found myself surprised by the slightness of their salty flavor.

Whoa. For pickled vegetables, these are far less salty than I expected. They're even kind of savory!

At home, pickles were typically coupled with rice; otherwise, they were too salty to eat. But these green pickles had the perfect level of saltiness.

In exchange for that lack of salt, they were actually rather hearty and even a bit spicy. *Did the master use chili pepels?* I hadn't expected much from these pickles, but I was wrong—they were delicious.

Everything here is good. It's that simple. I want more rice.

As if he'd read my mind or something, the master appeared with a bowl of rice piled to the top. "Sorry 'bout the wait. Here's some more white rice."

"Oooh, you have my gratitude, sir!"

I ate the rice alongside the vegetables and soup. *Truly a gift from the gods.*

After devouring about half the bowl of white perfection, I noticed the scent of something sweet.

Oh, yes. I forgot about the meat.

I'd been so enthralled by the rice, soup, and pickles that I completely ignored the pork. I stretched my chopsticks out and picked up a strip of the pig meat uncommon in the west. I had no clue whether it'd pair well with the white rice, but its sweet aroma was positively captivating.

The light above reflected off the meat. I raised it and put it in my mouth.

As I bit into the thin strip, its juices spilled out. The meat's taste fused with the sweet and sour sauce, producing a strong flavor that spread across my tongue.

It's so tender. As I chewed the pork, I soon realized the secret behind its softness. The muscle had been cut with an extra-sharp knife and then pulverized.

This is a true feast. Is it really all right for someone like me to eat this on such an ordinary day?

The meat was carefully prepared, almost as though the master were going to serve it at a banquet or something. The problem was, it was clear even to me that eating this pork with white rice would make it that much more delicious.

This is bad. I'm not sure I can resist.

As a warrior, I understood that battle could break out at any given time, even after one's meal. Thus, it was important that one didn't fill oneself completely. That was what I'd been taught, and I'd stuck by that up until today.

Until today. Well, it should be fine. I may be a warrior, but I'm no longer of a warrior household. I'm just an adventurer now.

I recollected myself and yelled to the master. "Sir! Apologies, but could I have another bowl of rice?!"

By the time my stomach was screaming that it could hold no more food, I finally put my chopsticks down and asked for the bill.

After paying the extremely reasonable cost, I stood up. It was time to head to the village. "I shall return. The food was delicious."

"Lookin' forward to it! By the way, we're open over there once a week. So, if you happen to be in the area, come on by."

"Once every seven days. Understood." I rubbed my stomach, wanting to lie down somewhere, and nodded firmly to the master before leaving.

The rain had stopped while I was gone. The sky was blue and clear—the one thing that was the same between the east and the west.

Now then, it's time to slay some ogres so I can return to the restaurant again in seven days.

After watching the door disappear, I quickened my pace and made my way to the village.

Seven days later, I met Teriyaki Chicken and Seishu, my friends for life.

Side Story 4:

Dacquoise

It had all started when the old lady from the agency came to chat with me. I'd known her since I was just starting out as an adventurer.

"Little Sarah, I want to talk to you about something related to that housekeeping job you asked me to look into a while back. Do you mind?"

The woman had asked me to meet her at a pub I liked to eat at regularly. Rough folks usually stayed away from that place.

"Little Sarah, about that housekeeper you're looking for..." As usual, the woman rubbed her hip as she spoke to me. "Do you care if they're a demon?"

"A demon? Hmm. Could you give me the details?"

I was a little surprised by the old woman's words but soon calmed myself down. It wasn't particularly rare in the Empire to hire demons as housekeepers when one was gone. In the Kingdom, though, it was unheard of. That was why I figured that there had to be extenuating circumstances or something.

"Well, you see, I've been giving jobs to this young lady during the day lately. She's a hard, serious worker, honest, polite, and strangely well kept." As she apparently recalled the girl in question, the woman couldn't help smiling. Her expression soon darkened, though. "At this rate, some dastardly bastard's gonna catch her in his sights."

"Look, I totally understand," she added. "Hiring a demon as a housekeeper is crazy. But rotten folks wouldn't dare go near *your* house, right?"

"I suppose."

I was a little annoyed by how she'd worded it, but I got what she was implying. She wasn't wrong. The Gold family was big business in the Kingdom. As such, we had connections to adventurers, nobles, knights, mages, and even priests.

Lowbrow punks on the street would never have wanted to get involved with

us. As much as I hated to admit it, even I'd avoided trouble thanks to my family name.

"So, what do you think? Yes, she's a demon, but she really is a good girl. I just can't bear to see someone like her struggle."

She gazed at me pleadingly, almost like a mother begging someone to watch over her daughter.

I recalled that I'd heard rumors that the old lady at the job agency was a demon. When she was a baby, her human mother had apparently cut off her tail and raised her as a human. But when she got older, married, and had a demon child, she was chased from her home. At the end of her long, tragic path, she'd eventually started a job agency.

"Fine. I'll meet with her, at least. I can't guarantee I'll hire her, though. Is that all right?"

I couldn't help being curious about the demon girl that the old woman recommended so fiercely.

"Thank you so much. I'll give her a map and tell her to come by later." The old lady's face wore a bright smile.

As luck had it, Aletta—the Restaurant to Another World's demon waitress—showed up at my front door.

My honest opinion was that hiring Aletta as my housekeeper had been an even better decision than I'd thought at the time.

She was excellent when it came to cleaning, and she was smart. Although she couldn't read, she had a sharp memory and never forgot anything I asked of her. She also paid a great deal of attention to detail. Besides, the numerous goods and trinkets she received from the restaurant's master were all so mysterious and wonderful, they piqued my curiosity.

Aletta was also tremendously talented at boiling cobbler's tubers. The ones she made only had salt and butter on them, but they were surprisingly delicious. When I told her as much, she'd happily explained that the master

himself taught her how to make them.

Just by hiring Aletta, I transformed my house from a place where I simply stored things into a rather cozy place to stay.

My little sister, Shia, used to only come by on occasion. Now she practically lived here.

“My dear sister is rather late,” Shia commented.

“You’re right,” Aletta agreed. “Ah—but she did say that she was going to copy down some old texts at a friend’s house, so I’m sure she’ll be home soon.”

“I’m home,” I said.

Shia turned her attention to me, acting as if she were the head of the household. “Oh, my. Welcome home, dear sister.”

An expensive tea set she’d brought from home sat atop the table. The scent of honey and tea made of ground mikun skin rose from the cup in front of her. She’d likely had Aletta pour her some.

“Are you all right, Shia? Mom and Dad aren’t exactly keen on you coming here, right?”

Seeing Shia so outwardly carefree worried me. Mom and Dad weren’t terribly happy that she came by my place so often. They were afraid that she might catch the “sickness” from me.

“Worry not, dear sister. I’m no longer a child who longs to be an adventurer,” Shia replied. “Plus, Mom and Dad aren’t as annoying about this as they used to be. At least, not since I told them that you have the only means by which to acquire the ‘gold treats.’”

I narrowed my eyes at Shia’s disquieting words and completely calm expression. “Oh, c’mon.”

Shia caught my hesitation. “It’s not a lie, is it? Aletta’s your housekeeper, and you’re the one who told her not to say where she gets them, correct?”

“I guess that’s true.” All I could do was nod my head.

If I admitted that those gold treats were from a restaurant in another world, who knew what would happen to the door Aletta used? Heck, that would cause Aletta all kinds of trouble. I was no fool. I knew how much that job meant to her.

“Look, it hasn’t been easy for me, either.”

Shia sighed as she explained the slight problem she’d encountered. Apparently, she’d been serving the baked goods that Aletta bought her not just to visitors but also to her friends during teatime.

They’d obviously gone over well with those crowds and had come to be referred to as “gold treats.”

“My friends say all manner of things about those gold treats. They think I’m trying to monopolize them, so they keep asking me where the baker lives,” Shia concluded. “Mom and Dad have realized that I have no intention of ever becoming an adventurer, if nothing else. Since Mom would be in a bit of trouble if she lost access to those gold treats, she’s become rather soft on the subject of me visiting you.”

Shia gazed at Aletta. “By the way, Aletta, didn’t you say that you had a brand-new confection today?”

“Ah, yes! That’s right!” Aletta nodded, pulling out something different from the usual baked goods.

She placed the otherworldly desserts on the table. “The baker who’s friends with the master said that this is a new item he plans to sell soon. He wants me to try it and give him my thoughts.”

Shia observed the treats atop the table curiously. “What a bizarre shape. They look far thicker than cookies. Wouldn’t these be hard to eat?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I wonder what they are.”

I was rather befuddled by the mysterious food in front of us. I’d never seen anyone eat anything like those before, even at the Restaurant to Another World.

I was typically pretty full after eating a mincemeat cutlet, so I rarely got

dessert. That said, all kinds of visitors came by the restaurant specifically for its sweets.

I'd seen those who looked to be high-ranking priests and priestesses, judging by their appearances. I'd seen nobility, and I'd seen truly exalted people that even I—who lived as a noblewoman—would never have come into contact with.

I'd seen such guests eat all kinds of sweets that looked nothing like cookies. Nonetheless, I'd never seen any confection like what Aletta had brought home.

They were oblong desserts, and there was a light brown one and a dark brown one. As Shia said, they were several times thicker than any cookie. They kind of resembled stones, if anything.

"Um, I believe the baker referred to these as 'dacquoises,'" Aletta explained. "I had a bite of the light brown one, and it was quite delicious. The difference in color between the two is because they're made using different ingredients, so they taste different, too."

"Huh," I murmured.

Aletta's explanation was enough to get me curious. It was quite rare for me to find myself faced with a dessert I'd never seen or tasted. My love of rare things was as strong as any treasure hunter's.

"Would it be all right if we indulged in this dessert, then?" I asked.

"Of course! Your family hired me, so I wanted you both to get to try it!" Aletta replied with a smile.

Those were undoubtedly her true feelings. It was actually hard for me to believe that such a kind girl had made it this far in one piece, especially given how people treated demons.

Oddly impressed with the young lady, I grabbed the dark dessert from the plate. Despite its appearance, it was quite light.

"Then I'll start with this one." Shia picked up the light brown dacquoise.

"Please enjoy!" Aletta said half-jokingly, as if she were at the restaurant. She headed back to the kitchen, where she was boiling some water for our mikun

tea.

Aletta made me think of the master. I peered down at the dessert in my hand. At first glance, it looked like a stone, but it was actually rather light. As I thought about what could possibly be inside it, I took a bite from the edge.

Ah! Only the surface is hard. The insides are really soft.

As my teeth touched the surface, it broke, spreading a sweet flavor through my mouth. The sugary taste had a dash of bitterness.

The outer shell crumbled away on my tongue and vanished. Underneath it was something as soft as the blankets at my old home. That also dissolved in my mouth quickly.

“This is delicious,” Shia whispered.

I couldn’t help quietly agreeing with Shia’s opinion. The dessert was nothing like a cookie, but it was still delightful. I took another bite and was surprised by a brand-new flavor spreading through my mouth.

“Is this...whipped cream?”

The thick cream was sandwiched inside the dacquoise. I must’ve missed it because my first bite was from the edge. The unique sweetness with a dash of bitterness was definitely chocolate; I couldn’t help almost closing my eyes at the flavor.

It was so wonderful that, as the cream melted in my mouth and vanished, I found myself saddened by how fleeting it was.

“This is great.” Shia finished her light brown dacquoise at the same speed I finished mine. “It’s nothing like the cookies we usually eat, but it’s nice and soft. I like it!”

“Agreed,” I replied. “May I have a bite of yours?” *Shia’s is a bit lighter in color.*

I took a piece of her dacquoise, which undoubtedly tasted different from the chocolate one I’d eaten moments before. Its texture felt about the same, but it lacked the chocolate dacquoise’s bitterness. Instead, it was quite sweet.

After Shia’s dacquoise melted in my mouth, its aftertaste lasted much longer, allowing me to enjoy the sweet sensation further. *I like the chocolate one*

better. Still, this is rather delightful.

Judging by Shia's expression, she must've preferred the light brown dacquoise.

Yeah, this really is good. With that thought, I reached for my cup of mikun tea and remembered something important.

"Aletta, come eat with us!" I invited Aletta to sit down. She was standing up, preparing our tea.

"Yes, come!" agreed Shia. "This is all quite delicious, but I bet it'd taste better if we all enjoyed it together."

"Huh? But—um—I'm just the housekeeper. Don't worry, I have my own serving set aside. And, well, I'm a demon."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Even as Aletta tried to refuse, Shia encouraged her to come sit. "This is my sister's house, and she's just an adventurer. You're her hired help, no? I see nothing wrong with eating together, then."

"Excuse me, isn't that my line? Not that it matters," I added. "C'mon, Aletta. Sit down. Let's eat."

Perhaps moved by my words, Aletta slowly sat and reached for the dark dacquoise.

At the end of the day, food tasted better when you got to enjoy it with friends.

Treasure hunters sometimes cooperated toward a common goal, but generally speaking, they rarely became friendly. I'd heard plenty of old stories about treasure hunters who, laying their eyes on fortunes, went at each other's throats and murdered one another. Maybe that was why.

Does that mean Aletta's my first friend?

I left my most important treasures with her every time I went out on an adventure, which meant I trusted her.

Sure, on the one hand, I could just have visited the restaurant to track her down if that ever became necessary. At the end of the day, however, I truly

believed that Aletta was a good-hearted young woman worthy of my trust.

There was also one more reason. As I watched her enjoy her dacquoise carefully and slowly, I couldn't help thinking about how amazingly cute she was. Who cared if she was a demon?

Yeah, this is all right. I'd never say it aloud, because it was embarrassing, but Aletta was my friend.

Satisfied with my own answer, I took a nice big sip of mikun tea.

Side Story 5:

Beef Curry

I first encountered this particular dish forty-nine days after I began working at Western Cuisine Nekoya, also known as the Restaurant to Another World. In other words, on my eighth visit.

As usual, I'd made my way from the end of the sky to the other world. From the kitchen, I saw the remnants of a mysterious memory in which a group was enjoying a meal.

They were clearly residents of this world and had brown and black hair. They appeared to be devouring something on the same plates used for chicken curry. According to the otherworldly words they used, it was delicious.

However, what they were eating was a much darker color than the chicken curry I was familiar with.

Of course, I was curious about the memory, so I assessed the group's food using my sense of smell. It was ever-so-slightly different from the curry dishes that I knew about but was indeed curry.

The scent of the curry eaten here the previous night lingered in the restaurant.

I smell curry. It's different from usual.

When I pointed out the scent, the master seemed surprised by my sense of smell. "Huh? Oh, nice catch. I planned on serving you all some leftovers from yesterday's daily special."

He pulled something from the fridge. "I was gonna have you ladies try it out, so I put some aside for you."

The pot was small enough for the master to hold in one hand. He opened it and showed me its contents.

The food inside the pot was indeed the same as in the memory I'd seen. Some kind of curry-like stuff filled the pot. Its scent was weak, since it was chilled, but

it was undoubtedly curry. However, it was a much darker brown than chicken curry, or curry and rice, and had a unique aroma all its own. I couldn't see anything but meat inside the curry.

This is curry?

"Yup! Leftovers from yesterday's special."

Aletta also seemed curious about the pot's contents. "Wow. It's much darker than Alphonse's curry and rice, or Kuro's favorite chicken curry. This is curry, too?"

The master nodded and began to explain.

"See, I wanted to make curry without pork, so I cooked two test dishes. After having my people try them both, we decided to put chicken curry on the menu. But this one here turned out pretty well, too. So, yesterday, I offered it as a daily special."

"Oh, I see. Wow! You thought of multiple new dishes at once? You're amazing, Master!"

Aletta looked at the master, flashing what was called a "smile" at him as she spoke. In turn, he "smiled" back, looking at a photo on the wall of him and the previous master posing together.

"The curry here is Gramps's recipe," the master explained. "It's damn good, and it has plenty of fans, but I've been thinking that it's about time to come up with my own curry. The problem is that I have to make two different types: Indian and European."

It appeared as though the current master and his blood relative had some sort of internal ruleset when it came to the most delicious dish of all—curry.

I briefly searched through the master's memories, entering the consciousness stored inside his words.

I found a memory in which the master was still young. The previous master had scolded him for his form as he cut vegetables and meats, and for leaving food on the fire too long, telling him that he'd never make Nekoya's curry right at that rate.

The master should have found a memory like that unpleasant, but for some odd reason, he didn't.

"See, European-style curry focuses on savoriness over spiciness. And since it uses muscle meat, it ends up tasting very different from other curry-and-rice dishes."

As the master continued to explain, I saw yet another memory. This one was of the master working on two different curry recipes.

It appeared that he'd made lots of curry dishes that tasted similar, eaten them, and then rebuilt them from scratch about seventeen times. Then, I saw him finally taste both curries and nod firmly.

Having seen into the master's memories, I found myself quite curious. *I want to try it.*

Fortunately, the master understood that. "Excellent. Later tonight."

Apparently, he felt that curry wasn't a good breakfast, since he asked me to wait until the evening. "I know that you can handle morning curry, but this is a little heavy for Aletta. I've also got chicken curry ready to go, along with her usual breakfast, so make do with that for now."

Okay.

I ended up politely following his instructions, just as I'd promised I would when I started working at the restaurant. *How unfortunate.*

"Oh! I'm looking forward to it," Aletta said.

I was slightly pleased to find that she was in the same headspace as me. I ate my chicken curry as usual and got to work.

Aletta and I tidied the restaurant, grabbed whatever ingredients the master needed, and cleaned the tableware. Once our first visitor of the day from my world arrived, I took their order, brought them their food, and took their dirty plates to the kitchen. As I performed my usual work, time flew by.

"I shall return," said Red.

As usual, I watched her head back to her territory with a large golden pot of beef stew, marking the end of the day.

Master saw Red exit through the door and stretched his arms out widely. “Okay, that’s it for today! I’ve already heated up the curry, so it won’t take long to serve. We’re gonna eat in the cafeteria tonight, so you two grab a table. Kuro, are you good with the beef curry to start?”

“Yay!” Hearing the master’s words, Aletta seemingly regained her energy.

I, however, was the same as always. *Yes, that’s fine.*

Now then, what was this beef curry like? I sat across from Aletta at a table, watching her beam while awaiting the beef curry.

Master brought out our food as if we were visitors to the restaurant. “Sorry for the wait. Here’s your beef curry!”

He set down a pitcher full of water that tasted faintly of fruit and then put down glass cups of ice water. Then there was the plate of white weeds, “rice.” Last but not least was the main course—beef curry. Although it was much darker than its chicken counterpart, it still smelled curry-like.

The master laid the different foods out himself, eventually setting down some silver spoons.

The aroma coming from the curry was weaker than chicken curry’s but still recognizable.

Aletta narrowed her eyes as she took it in. “Wow.”

I felt this temporal form of mine smile instinctively. I didn’t know why.

The master watched us and narrowed his own eyes. “It’s a little hot, so be careful,” he explained as if we were customers, before heading to the back. “Enjoy!”

“Oh, demon lord, thank you for the food.” Aletta was clearly impatient. Her prayer to *it* was much shorter than usual.

We grabbed our spoons and began to eat the curry in front of us. I pulled the plate of dark brown curry off to the side and carefully poured it onto the rice, taking great pains not to spill any. The dark curry covered the white rice, and I took a moment to enjoy its scent.

Aletta began to eat a little earlier than me. She preferred to scoop rice up with her spoon and then put curry on top.

After taking her first bite, she immediately scrunched up her face. “Gosh! It’s spicy but delicious!”

She immediately took a sip of water and then returned to the curry. She clearly didn’t hate it.

I collected myself and finally took a bite of beef curry.

It’s not terribly spicy, but it’s delicious. That was my first impression.

It was much milder than the chicken curry I usually ate. Like the chicken curry, however, it was full of soft vegetables. Still, its composition was even more complex, and it had a strong, savory taste. The meat flavor was also powerful compared to chicken curry.

Is the meat soft, too?

Aletta ate her curry and rice first, leaving the other ingredients for now. “What kind of meat is this? It’s really tender.”

Actually... I hadn’t put much thought into that, but it was indeed true that beef curry included beef sinew. Or, at least, that was what the master had said.

In that case, it must taste different.

I scooped up a piece of meat, noticing how it jiggled slightly atop my spoon. Curious as to what it would taste like, I put it in my mouth and found myself surprised.

The meat is melting?

I was stunned to realize that the meat dissolved on top of my tongue. Its mouthfeel was completely different from the chicken curry meat I was familiar with. It melted on its own, and I could chew through it without even putting it between my teeth.

That strange sensation accompanied the meat’s incredibly savory taste, which was the true source of the beef curry’s flavor.

Aletta quietly continued to eat—a scoop of rice, a scoop of curry. She

occasionally stopped to scoop up a piece of meat.

For a while, the restaurant was filled only with the sound of spoons brushing against plates.

“Now, that’s what I like to see! Looks like I’ve got enough for seconds for you both. How about it?” the master asked as he brought over his own plate of food.

Aletta and I nodded simultaneously at the question.

After eating with the master, Aletta let out a content sigh, facing her empty curry plate.

“That was delicious! Are you sure you don’t want to add beef curry to the menu? I’m sure Alphonse would love it.”

Clearly, Aletta wanted the master to make this a permanent staple of the restaurant.

Unfortunately, the master shook his head at Aletta’s proposal. “Well, you see, my staff actually pointed out a huge problem to me. So, beef curry’s a no-go. I’ll probably only serve it as a daily special every once in a while.”

“What kind of huge problem?” Aletta looked down at her clean, empty plate. She must’ve really enjoyed the beef curry.

What a waste of something so delicious. I couldn’t help voicing my own thoughts.

Although the beef curry’s spiciness didn’t compare to chicken curry, the savory curry soup—full of soft vegetables and tender meat—was good enough that I would’ve liked to eat it every now and then. It was well made.

“The beef curry’s tastiness isn’t really the problem.” explained the master, shaking his head. “I mean, dealing with beef sinew and the like is a pain, but that’s not the biggest issue.”

“Someone asked me to make curry without pork, because they can’t eat pork,” he continued. “The problem is that the country they’re from is full of people who love curry but can’t eat beef. Cooking doesn’t amount to much if

people can't eat it. Doesn't matter whether it's good or bad. That means that I have to settle for chicken curry, which I know everyone can eat."

It looks as though there's still much for me to learn about the other world, I thought to myself that night.

Side Story 6:

Pork Miso Soup Set

Another day of work came to an end. Things had been busy since early-morning prep, and the actual day had just flown by.

As usual, I watched the last customer leave with her pot of beef stew, and then sighed lightly. Today had been especially busy, since it was Meat Day.

I'm not nearly as tired as I expected.

Back when I was the only one working on Saturdays, I'd dreaded dates when Meat Day and Saturday overlapped. I ended up dead tired the next day.

But not anymore. The reason was crystal clear. It was all thanks to my two new employees, who hadn't been here last Meat Day.

"Okay, we're gonna go clean the cafeteria now!"

We're off.

Thinking back on it, I was lucky.

In the ten years since I'd taken Nekoya on, I'd made lots of embarrassing mistakes.

Gramps had done all kinds of things other than cooking. So when he passed away and I became the second-generation master, I suddenly couldn't get by anymore with just knowing how to cook. I needed to know how to run a business, how to be this place's owner.

I'd started helping at Nekoya as a cook after graduating college, so I wasn't completely without experience. The old man had taught me all kinds of things besides cooking. Still, when Gramps left for the next world, it was all too much for a young guy in his mid-twenties to take on.

Quite frankly, thinking back on it, I'd made some truly stupid mistakes that I'd rather not remember. But somehow, over the last ten years, I'd managed to

learn.

One thing I'd learned in that decade was that students from the local high school or college—who wanted to earn money to survive, not just to play around—often worked the hardest.

When the Restaurant to Another World had suddenly started getting more regulars, I'd realized that I couldn't run things by myself. I'd actually been thinking of putting out a "hiring" sign for a human from the other world when Aletta had wandered into the restaurant. She'd just been fired from her previous waitressing job and needed work. When I heard her story, I felt lucky, to be perfectly honest.

I was getting way more otherworldly customers, and Aletta had experience as a waitress *and* seemed to be a hard worker. How could I not hire her?

As luck had it, my first impression was on point, and Aletta was now an irreplaceable part of my Saturdays. She was a charming person whom even Nekoya's older guests loved, and she knew how to deal with newcomers as well.

Then there was my second worker. The "final customer," who'd known the previous master for quite some time, introduced Kuro to me. She'd taken work at Nekoya on the condition that I pay her in chicken curry. I wasn't particularly fond of paying in food, but apparently, money didn't exist where Kuro lived. There wasn't much I could do about that.

When Kuro first visited the restaurant, I'd been pretty surprised. The way she ate—and the moment when she'd suddenly asked to work for me—proved equally shocking. But now, I was really glad I'd brought her on.

She didn't really speak. Actually, she basically only used telepathy to relay her thoughts to us. She was kind of emotionless, but when it came to work, she was fast and precise. Kuro paid close attention to detail as well.

Together, Kuro and Aletta handled waitressing and even helped out in the kitchen at times. Honestly, my work got a lot less stressful thanks to the two of them.

“Gotcha. I’ll get dinner ready, then. Let’s see.” After giving it some thought, I proposed my idea for tonight’s meal. “Pork miso soup, fried rice balls with butter soy sauce, and rolled eggs. How does that sound?”

Since this morning, Aletta had looked as though she was craving pork miso soup, so I decided to add that to a bigger meal.

“Awesome! I can’t wait!” Aletta smiled and answered excitedly before heading off to clean. It seemed like I was right on the money.

I couldn’t help grinning as I watched her trot away with a lightness in her step that betrayed her mood. It was time to cook the last dish of the day.

I took the remaining rice from the pot and rolled it, careful not to let it crumble. I made ball shapes, since I wasn’t using seaweed this time, and then placed the balls on the grill.

Taking care not to turn the heat too high, I cooked the rice balls so that they finished cooking just as the ladies finished their work. Their surfaces turned from white to a light brown color. Once they started to make popping noises, I used a brush to spread a glaze made of soy sauce and sweet sake over the balls and continued to cook them. Thanks to the sauce, the rice balls’ surfaces gradually grew browner and browner.

The smell of fried rice filled the air. That aroma was enough to make my stomach growl, but I did my best to suck it up and kept making rolled eggs.

If I remember correctly, Aletta likes sweet stuff.

Rolled eggs were a simple recipe that divided customers’ preferences. Last time, I’d made two variants of the dish, both sweet. I went heavy on the sugar and the sweet sake as well. It was a little too sugary for me, but Aletta was a fan.

I didn’t know how Aletta had been raised, but she didn’t play favorites when it came to food. That said, she did have foods she particularly liked. In our last few months of working together, I’d figured out what she enjoyed. She preferred meat and eggs over fish or vegetables, and something a bit more flavorful over plain white rice.

And then, of course, she loved sweets, dessert or not.

Aletta returned, having finished her work in the cafeteria. “I’m done cleaning!”

“Perfect.” I said as I began the finishing touches. “Hold on for just a sec.”

I placed pats of butter onto the fried rice balls as they began to crackle. Then I turned my attention to the finished rolled eggs, set them down on the chopping board, and cut them into easy-to-eat pieces.

Dropping some butter into the pork miso soup, I placed the fried rice balls—now soaked in melted butter—onto a plate. *Everything’s done.*

I put it all down in front of Aletta, who looked as though she was about to start drooling.

“Sorry ’bout the wait. Here’s Nekoya’s special staff pork miso set.”

I’d better hurry up, I thought. I knew full well that Aletta would never start eating before I did, so I quickly got my own serving and prepared Kuro’s curry. “Perfect. All done.”

I could smell the fried rice balls and soy sauce mixed with butter, the golden-yellow eggs, and the steam coming off the pork miso soup.

When all three meals were ready, I finally sat down. “Now then, thanks for eating dinner with me.”

“Ah—uh—th-thanks for eating dinner with me!” Aletta was clearly hungry, since she simply repeated after me before digging in.

I watched as she grabbed a large fried rice ball with both hands. The smell of butter drifted up as she bit into it.

Her face scrunched for a moment, perhaps because the rice ball was still quite hot. Then her expression quickly morphed into a big smile.

Great. Looks like she likes it. After confirming that, I could finally relax and take a bite of my own rice ball.

The butter’s strong flavor had made its way into the rice. It joined forces with the rice ball’s crisp, soy-sauce doused surface to fill my empty stomach. Oil-fried

rice balls tasted fairly different from fried rice balls with soy sauce. Diners' opinions were always pretty split between the two, but I found myself quite fond of the latter.

After I enjoyed the crust's crisp, salty flavor, the untouched white rice beneath fused with the lingering salty taste, creating the perfect balance.

I loved that I got to enjoy soy sauce-flavored rice *and* white rice at the same time. You could make fried rice balls by mixing soy sauce into the rice at the start, but I preferred spreading it on the surface.

With that in mind, I took a sip of miso soup with melted butter. Thanks to the latter, the broth tasted gentle; the butter restrained the salty miso, leading to a richer overall flavor. It didn't really go with Japanese dishes, but it was perfect for a western cuisine joint like this.

The fatty ribs in the pork miso soup, combined with the buttery flavor, pushed you to devour the soft vegetables. This wasn't a miso soup you drank; it was a miso soup you ate.

I took a sip of the soup and then another bite of a fried rice ball, refreshing myself. I could feel all the exhaustion inside me slip out.

After enjoying the miso soup, I turned my attention to the rolled eggs.

I grabbed a single slice of the still-warm eggs and bit into it. Not much time had passed since I'd cooked the eggs, so while they weren't burning hot, they were still warm and soft. The sweet juices inside spread through my mouth and soaked into it.

"Whew!" With her chopsticks, which she'd recently learned to use, Aletta dug ravenously into a slice of rolled egg.

It was one thing to eat food in a premade lunch box. It was another thing entirely to eat it while it was still nice and warm.

As I watched Aletta wolf down her meal, I started eating mine, chest full.

Hmm. Why does this feel so familiar? At the same time, there's something nostalgic about all this. Why?

It wasn't long before I recalled a memory.

Ah, that's right. The lunch box I had back during Sports Day in elementary school was just like this.

While I was attending elementary school, my mother and father had passed away. So it was always my grandmother who'd come to watch school functions and events. Well, except for Sports Day. My grandparents both turned up for that day.

The restaurant had always been closed on Sundays. Now that I looked back on it, I bet that my grandmother and grandfather had wanted to make sure I never felt alone or sad after losing my parents.

During Sports Day events where older brothers and dads could join, my grandmother hopped in and participated, taking first place over the younger guys. In the end, folks always said that having her join was against the rules.

The only things I remembered as clearly as that were my grandfather's lunch boxes.

On that Sunday morning, my grandfather made us the most flawless lunch boxes, and they always included rolled eggs. The eggs were sweet, too, just like the ones I made for dinner. After running around during Sports Day, eating sweet rolled eggs with some rice balls or inari sushi was the absolute best.

Of course, there were other foods in the lunch box, too. But the rolled eggs in particular were especially delicious. Apparently, Gramps had made them for my grandmother when he proposed to her.

As I made my way through junior high and high school, my grandparents stopped coming to my Sports Days. My tastes changed, too. I started liking saltier eggs and stopped eating sweet ones altogether. I'd totally forgotten about that until now.

I guess I'm gettin' up there in age, huh?

I was already past my mid-thirties; elementary school felt like a distant memory. Heck, it had been over two decades ago. Still, the years had flown by so fast that I found myself thinking, *Where did the time go?*

There were folks my age with daughters as old as Aletta, now that I thought about it. With that in mind, I kept gobbling up my food until it was all gone.

More curry, please. Kuro had seemingly waited for me to finish before making her request, her plate long since empty.

“Gotcha. Hold on just a sec.” I smirked at Kuro, stood up, and glanced at Aletta.

She sat in front of her empty plate, looking back up at me with something of an embarrassed expression. She seemed hopeful.

Yeah, I get what she’s trying to say. I also totally understood why it was so hard to actually vocalize it.

“It’ll take a little while, but do you want some more rolled eggs?” I asked the young demon lady.

“Oh, gosh, yes, please!”

I couldn’t help feeling energized at Aletta’s excited response.



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